

DAVID PATTIE

THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE AND POPULAR MUSIC

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ROUTLEDGE



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This book explores the ways in which theatrical techniques are used to create shared performance environments for musicians and fans in popular music.

Readers will discover how stage lighting, costuming, choreography, character adoption, and spatial design transform concerts into large-scale theatrical experiences. Through engaging case studies of artists and bands such as The Weeknd, Lil Nas X, Taylor Swift, BTS, and Lana Del Rey, this book reveals how these practices have adapted to changing technologies and cultural trends, offering both historical context and contemporary analysis.

Essential reading for undergraduate students in performance studies, music, and cultural studies, this accessible book will also appeal to general readers interested in understanding the theatrical artistry behind modern music performance.

David Pattie is Associate Professor in the Department of Creative Industries at the University of Birmingham, UK.

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*To all the students who've been involved in conversations and classes about
live music with me, over many, many years.*

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INTRODUCTION

The place of performance

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Muse, Manchester Evening News Arena, 9th April 2016

We've come, my wife, my son and I, to see Muse at the Manchester Evening News Arena on the 9th April 2016. It's my son's first gig; he's been a fan of the band a while, and we promised that the next time they came to a venue near us, we'd go to see them. I'm not as keen on the band as my son and my wife. The music itself has always seemed to me too hyperbolic, the subject matter of the lyrics too bound up in windily vague conspiracy theories. Live, though, even I have to acknowledge that they are worth it: they know how to stage a show and they know how to work a crowd. And, of course, my son likes them, which in itself is by far the most important thing.

We've avoided YouTube, although we know that a quick search would bring up footage from most if not all of the venues on the tour so far. We have, however, looked at previous tours (giant screens, elaborate sets, chimneys belching flame, giant robots, hydraulic lifts, dancers suspended over the crowd) and that's been enough to whet my son's appetite for the gig. The journey to Manchester from our home is taken up with speculation about the staging and the tracks the band will play. When we get there, though, my son quietens; this part – getting into the venue, being

surrounded by people who like the same music that he does, and who demonstrate that love on t-shirts and other bits of assorted, wearable merchandise – is new. Also new are the bottleneck queues for ticket checks and the security pat-downs, the hunt through the milling crowds for the stairwell that takes us to our seats. We've chosen a location midway up the banked tiers of seating that surrounds the stage. My son's initially disappointed; all we can see is a central stage area, shaped like the profile of a drone – a large circle in the middle, with two broad catwalks leading to two smaller stages at opposite ends of the auditorium. For Muse, compared to the videos we've watched, the space looks sparse. When Phantogram, the supporting band, come on, they stick to the central stage; they use a few white lights, and what sounds like at most half of the gig's PA (public address) system. They do as well as any support band can, given that they're playing to an audience that is mainly interested in stocking up with drinks and food before Muse begin. Understandably, though, my son is not impressed. This is what happens, we tell him; playing support to a major band is a thankless task – they're not going to take the risk that your set will blow them away. The support makes do with what bits of staging the main band can spare. Just you wait. And we do, for what always seems longer than it needs to be, for the lights to dim, for the cheers to start, and for Muse's set to begin.

When that happens it takes, at most, a few seconds for any lingering doubts my son might have about the experience to dissipate. The lights go down; the album's closing track (a processed, acapella piece called 'Drones') plays over the PA: its lyrics appear on a circular LED screen directly above the centre of the stage; and lit spheres emerge from the top of the lighting rig, flying in controlled sequence over the audience. In the darkness, the three members of the band rise up to the level of the stage.

The spheres line up above the catwalks, and then, as loud as my son could wish, Muse launch into ‘Psycho,’ and the fans packed tight around the stage push forward. Even at our distance, I can feel the adrenaline surge, the sudden release of the crowd’s banked-up energy. And from there, through to the end of the final encore, my son gets all the excitement he could want – stabbing, pulsing lights, revolving stages, giant hands projected on transparent screens, turning the band into puppets, CGI (computer-generated imaging) sequences synched to the music, what looks like a missile flying out over the crowd, clouds of confetti blown high into the air. By the end of the night, along with the rest of the crowd (and along with me) he’s on his feet, bellowing along with the encores.

The row behind us was empty at the beginning of the gig, but between the support band and Muse’s entrance it’s filled by a group of men in at least their late 20s, dressed in Muse t-shirts from previous tours, carefully nursing plastic pint glasses. As they take their seats, one of the group notices us, turns to the others and says, half-jokingly, mind your language lads, there’s a young boy there. We laugh, and my son points out he’s probably heard worse at school. This starts a conversation about the other times they’ve seen Muse (by common consent, the *Resistance* tour was the best looking, and the *Unsustainable* tour was the most fun). When the gig starts, we learn very quickly that they’ve been on YouTube and that they have already pieced together an idea of the gig as a whole from all the videos they can find; one of them leans over to my son and says ‘watch this bit,’ or predicts the next song – and they’re almost always correct. When the main set finishes, they tell my son not to worry; Muse haven’t played ‘Knights of Cydonia’ yet, even though it’s a live staple, ‘but they will. It’s in the encores. They will.’ And sure enough, right at the end of the encores, Muse play ‘Knights of Cydonia,’ lights sweeping over both the band and

the auditorium, as though at this point we're all equally in charge of the music. As the last chords fade, one of the men leans over to us, smiling. Told you, he says.

Popular music as theatre

This book will take as its subject the evolution of overtly theatrical performances in popular music. I will trace the development of theatrical practices (for the purposes of this study, by this I will mean the use of designed staging and lighting; the evolution of technologies that fill increasingly large performance spaces; the creation of portable settings that both fit into a range of sites and that create a performative world that the audience would recognise as the expression of an artist's identity). Before I do so, it is worth noting an important, determining fact about performances like these in the contemporary popular music ecosystem; they are necessary. The Muse gig, described above, is as much of an exercise in carefully crafted theatrical production as anything found on the stages of the West End or Broadway, and as such it is as subject to economic and technological constraints as any piece of musical theatre. It also, at base, exists for the same reason as internationally successful musicals such as *Hamilton*. It is there to make money, to act as one part of the complex network of income streams that support the music industry in an age where the solid foundation of record or CD sales no longer exists. In 2019, according to an analysis posted on the Statista website, live music as a whole generated \$28.56 billion. The following year, the pandemic hit live revenues very badly, as one might expect (income dropped to \$7.32 billion) but once restrictions were lifted, revenue rose steeply once more (to an estimated \$22 billion in 2022, and a projected rise to just over \$30 billion in 2025; and these figures do not take into account the unpredictable impact of individual tours –

Taylor Swift's *Eras* tour, for example).¹ Within this, individual artists and bands, if they have the necessary profile and fanbase, can make the touring process extremely profitable.

One example can establish just how much even the most established act has come to rely on live performance. In 2009, U2 released the album *No Line on the Horizon*. The album was not one of their most successful; although it sold five million copies worldwide, this was half as much as their previous release (*How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* in 2004). Reviewers were generally unimpressed. Pitchfork, for example, described the album as 'heavy on half-assed word-salad characterizations and the sort of meaningless platitudes Bono used to be so great at (barely) avoiding.'² However, the 360° stadium tour that followed the album's release was extremely lucrative. During the 1980s, U2 had relied on relatively simple staging and on the dynamic interaction of the musicians with the audience. However, from *Zoo TV* (1992–1993) onwards, the sets grew more complex, more elaborate, and more visually striking. *Zoo TV* had banks of video and TV screens that could pick up locally broadcast programming, and Trabants³ used as part of the lighting rig. *PopMart*, the next tour, employed a huge video screen that stretched the length of the stage; subsequent tours (*Elevation* and *Vertigo*) used staging that incorporated the audience, bespoke video footage, giant beaded curtains that could act as screens, and lighting and set designs that incorporated the auditorium as well as the stage.

The 360° show (which was the culmination of a decade's worth of technological innovation) featured what was at that time the most expensive set ever used for large-scale stadium gigs. It was designed by Stufish Entertainment Architects, a firm founded by the British architect Mark Fisher, who had by this time amassed considerable experience in staging

large-scale music performances. Fisher had begun by designing sets for Pink Floyd (the *In the Flesh* tour in 1977) and had worked with The Rolling Stones during the 1980s – the time when the Stones moved from being primarily a recording to a touring band. He had been involved in U2's *Zoo TV* tour from 1992 to 1993 and had created the massive video wall set for the group's *PopMart* tour in 1997; these tours in particular served to recalibrate the audiences' perception of U2 as a touring band. The set Fisher created for the *360°* tour consisted of a circular stage, placed in the centre of the stadium. Four claw-like legs supported a central structure, 165 feet tall, that housed the lighting, the video screens, and the PA system. A circular catwalk, accessed by mobile walkways, completed the design; as had been the case in U2's previous two tours, a section of the audience could comfortably be accommodated between the walkway and the stage. The set was visually impressive in itself. It was also (to use a term that might seem surprising, for a structure so monumental) eminently practical. It ensured clear sightlines for the audience, either to the performers themselves or to their images, and it also allowed venues to sell more tickets because more of the venue could be given over to the audience.

However, it is unlikely that anyone attending the gigs did so because the set was practical. The staging itself was a monumental, visually impressive piece of art; its overwhelming visual impact, and the way that it dominated every venue on the tour, was a crucial factor in the tour's success. The design did two things simultaneously. First, it acted as a visual symbol of the tour – images and footage of the set were widely disseminated, and its silhouette was used as the logo for the shows and for the accompanying Blu-ray and photobook. Second, it changed the nature of the venue. The *360°* tour played stadia across the world, and stadium design tends to place functionality over aesthetics; they are also created for sports events, rather

than for musical performances. Such a space needs to be reconfigured, not just to make it suitable for a gig, but also to fit the design choices that fit the band or artist and the tour. A colossal piece of design technology like The Claw (as the 360° staging came to be called), themed to fit with a particular band and a particular set list, and aiming to meet the expectations of a particular group of fans, necessarily means that the space begins to mean something different. Not only does it establish a location appropriate to the band and the performance, it also transforms the stadium itself – it dominates the space, which can now be read as an adjunct of the set design. The venue loses its anonymity, at least for the duration of the performance. It is now as much a part of the design as the giant claw-shaped set. The audience, therefore, doesn't simply watch a performance in a place large enough to accommodate them. Rather, they enter a bespoke environment, fitted out in a manner that is visually striking and which reconfigures the space to fit the audience and the band. On the simplest level, this satisfies the fan, and justifies the price – an important consideration, given the importance of live performance as an income stream. And, in U2's case, it worked. *No Line on the Horizon*, as an album, might now be considered a staging post in U2's steady slide into relative cultural insignificance. The 360° tour, on the other hand, was one of the most successful exercises in revenue generation ever undertaken in popular music. It grossed \$736.4 million and was for many years the highest-grossing concert tour ever (it was overtaken by Ed Sheeran's ÷ Tour from 2017 to 2019, which grossed \$776.2 million;⁴ and both have been surpassed by the *Eras* tour, which in 2023 became the first to gross over \$1 billion,⁵ and subsequently went on to net over \$2 billion⁶).

It is worth reflecting on these numbers. Not because the experience of a gig, or its impact on the artists and audience, is necessarily reducible to the

purely economic; as the above description of the Muse gig at the MEN Arena demonstrates, gigs are sites of communal expression and cultural transmission as much as they are exercises in the production of revenue. The figures, however, help to demonstrate something else. Granted, Swift, U2, and Ed Sheeran might be up at the top end of the income scale: bands like Muse do not have quite the global reach to enable them to match the earning power of the *360°* tour, far less that of the *Eras* shows. But even if it could not match the larger tours in scale and revenue, the elaborately theatrical *Drones* arena tour helped the band to an income of \$46 million in 2016.⁷ With so much riding (for the larger bands and artists) on live work, and with (for the larger acts) arenas and stadiums to fill, striking staging and a performance that is theatrically impressive will help to sell tickets. If anything, the need to create an effective stage show is greater than it was for U2 in 2009, because the performance is culturally visible to an extent that was simply impossible in previous decades. A performatively dynamic or striking show plays not just to the audience in the venue; these days, it helps in sustaining the fanbase's engagement with the artist, whether or not they have attended the gig itself. Early on in the evolution of theatricalised live performance, significant performances were rarely filmed; shows such as David Bowie's 1974 *Diamond Dogs* tour, for example, are only accessible through a relatively small number of clips (a good selection can be found in the BBC *Arena* documentary *David Bowie: Cracked Actor* (1975)). Now, a touring band or artist's performance will be captured on high-quality mobile cameras, and the footage posted on YouTube immediately afterwards. Billie Eilish, for example, played at the AO Arena (as the MEN has been rechristened) on the 7th June 2022. On the morning of the 8th, footage of the whole gig was available online.

There are, therefore, strong economic and practical imperatives that push those involved in creating tours towards sets and stagecraft that are designed to show the artist off to best advantage. However, these imperatives come up against other, equally important, aspects of the performance – in this case determined by the complex forces that shape live popular music. As this book will illustrate, musicians in performance are exposed to a large number of competing agendas, deriving from a large number of complex sources – whether those are determined by the performer's history, their cultural impact, the influence of generic tropes, the audience's awareness of its role in the event (and what behaviour is possible, and what is not), the technologies available (their positioning in the space, the flexibility they afford, even whether or not they are reliable), the nature and history of the venue or the performance space, and the nature and history of the geographical and cultural environment within which the venue is placed. These forces are understood, to a greater or lesser extent, by performers, all those involved in the production of popular music events, and those who assess the events (whether they are journalists, academics, fans, or those whose interactions are more casual – which can cover everything from attendance at the event to seeing accounts of it online, in print, or via broadcast media). When events take place, they act as sites in which all of these different elements, each one with their own weight of socially derived and determined knowledge, are brought to bear in an event which both affirms and develops what performers and audiences think they know about their relation to each other and their relation to the wider culture that shapes the performance.

To further complicate the argument (if the above were not complicated enough), we can say that, for all the complexity of these interactions, there is no clear way to determine the value of the event. In other words, what

counts as a good gig is something that is well-nigh impossible to define. It is not entirely a subjective judgement; for one thing, as the Muse fans who sat behind my son illustrated, it is or can be communal, open to various levels of discussion based on the individual's and the group's knowledge of, expectations of, and interaction with the performance. For another, there are socially and culturally determined criteria against which the event is judged. It would not be permissible, under most circumstances, for the Metal band Gojira to bring an Electronic Dance Music (EDM)-influenced version of their set, complete with DJ, to venues filled with Metal fans; it would be equally impermissible, under most circumstances, for the rapper Megan Thee Stallion to come on stage in a cardigan and an acoustic guitar, and to do 'Savage' in the style of Joni Mitchell. However, as with all such assertions, even this needs heavy qualification. Footage of Rammstein, for example, performing in Berlin on the 22nd June 2019, shows the band dancing to a remix of 'Deutschland'; the music is performed by the DJ Richard Kruspe, who is positioned behind a set of decks, one third of the way up the central column at the back of the set. In other words, the framework of expectations that surrounds the gig (in this case, largely determined by the generic expectations both fans and audiences bring to the event) can prove a strong determining influence on how the event is created and received, but, in practice, the framework is flexible and can stand a great deal of variation.

The performance and reception of any live music performance are therefore subject to the interaction of a large number of forces, which both structure and complicate any judgements about the success or otherwise of the performance, even if they cannot determine the precise responses either of the individual or the collective. And yet a further complication comes

from the nature of the judgements both fans and artists make. As Frith et al. note, at the end of their three-volume history of live music in Britain:

As Ruth Finnegan (1989) suggested 30 years ago, the starting point of understanding the value of live music is the interplay of transcendent and everyday experiences. If nothing else, our history confirms that live music remains a component of the unfolding of human lives: growing up and growing old; sex and courtship; work and leisure; settling and resettling; friendship and identity; ambition and disenchantment; celebration and loss. The value of music is the value of life, which is why a good gig is hard to define but easy to recognise: what audience members describe as ‘transcendence’ is an intense feeling of *presence* and *flow*. It is both an intensely individual experience of being sociable and an inescapably social experience of being oneself.⁸

As this passage suggests, any judgement about the ultimate value or otherwise of a particular performance is necessarily based on a set of definitions that are, if not entirely vague, then at least numinous, embodied, and inescapably tangled up in other definitions and points of personal and social identification. To go back to the Muse concert described above, I’m still not a particular fan of the band. The experience of a successful performance did not change that fact (which is itself something I know, but which I would find hard to quantify or to defend, beyond the simple statement ‘they’re not really for me’). I can say that my physical investment in the performance was sparked by the effectiveness of the staging or by the unfolding, dynamic narrative of the performance. I can say, too, that I am as susceptible as anyone to the intense emotional feedback loop audience members experience in situations like this, whereby my excitement feeds

and is fed by the excitement of those around me. But I also know that my enjoyment is based as much on my son's reaction as it is on anything that adheres to the form and the structure of the gig itself. I know, too, that it's influenced by my amusement at the comments made by the men on the row behind us (an amusement which is sparked by the certain knowledge that, in other circumstances, I'd probably be doing and saying much the same things). It's shaped, too, by gratitude – to Muse for putting on a good show, and to the fans behind us for taking the time to welcome and educate my son, in an environment which is for him both new and strange.

Lastly, I know that I know these things now. That is, at this distance (and having converted the event into a narrative that is necessarily more coherent than it felt at the time) I have separated out the various strands of the experience, and I have come to a reasonably settled conclusion about them. At the time, though, I experienced and embodied them as a unity; I was present within the event (that is, I was unreflectingly aware of the event, while at the same time using my experience of similar events and the response of those around me to come to at least a preliminary sense of how well the event was developing) and I experienced the event as flow (that is, as an embodied process in which I am myself involved). Any judgement I make about the gig is not based on settled criteria that I could define; nor is it final. It is experienced first, and then converted into narrative as the event becomes memory; but in memory any more objective judgement of the event's success is based on a wide range of criteria that are themselves not codified, and whose relative importance is finally a matter of personal judgement.

In what follows, I will argue that the development of what might be termed theatricality in popular music performance sits at the intersection of all of the competing forces outlined above. These forces have evolved over

time, in a period stretching from the mid-1960s to the present, and this evolution is itself, of course, part of the wider and equally complex evolution of popular musical forms and styles over the same period. It is possible to identify some key evolutionary drivers; as I have already indicated, there is a strong commercial imperative behind the development of staging techniques, driven by the changing nature and size of the industry. Frith et al. ([2013](#)–2021) and [Waksman \(2022\)](#), for example, discuss the gradual evolution of touring networks in the later 1960s and 1970s; as bands filled larger halls across different geographical territories, bespoke lighting and staging ensured both that new spaces could be filled, and that audiences would get what was in many ways a standardised experience. Staging techniques and performance tropes also evolve as genres evolve. It is possible to trace a clear line of development from the iconography associated with Black Sabbath in the 1970s (the quasi-religious symbolism, the dark costuming, but also the ostentatiously imposing banks of amps and speakers) through to contemporary Metal bands like Sleep Token and Ghost (see [Chapter 4](#)). It is also possible to trace the gradual dissemination of theatrical techniques associated with commercially dominant genres into other, related musical styles. For example, one way to describe the development of popular music staging and performance from the 1980s through to the present could trace the growing commercial power of Rap, and the gradual adaptation of the forms of staging associated with Rap – open, flat floor sets, catwalks, and B and C stages – by other genres (RnB, Pop, Metal, and so on).

Gigs are shaped by external forces, and they are also shaped by internal forces – ones that stem from the performance and reception of live music. For example, one could discuss the development of staging in gigs as an example of what might be termed the blockbuster imperative; that, in the

larger spaces, staging is driven both by a need to present something familiar that calls back to what the audience expect from the artist and the form, and at the same time, by a need to give the audience something different, something bigger, something more impressive. To take an example, Beyoncé's *Experience* tour in 2007 begins with the singer entering from below the stage, climbing up from a trapdoor lit from below; a curtain of pyrotechnics showers sparks behind her as she stands on the catwalk and asks the audience, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, are you ready to be entertained?' Nine years later, at the beginning of her *Formation* stage show, the audience have to wait a little longer before they see the star; a giant white rotating cube centre stage acts as a projection screen, building to an image of Beyoncé, a flower held in her mouth.⁹ White lights at stage level start to pulse in time with the opening track; as the first of the tour's troupe of 19 dancers process on to the stage, a hype artist tells the audience they've 'come to slay.' This is taken up by Beyoncé herself, as her image is projected full length on the surface of the cube, which towers over the audience. Both entrances have the same dynamic; the staging is designed to foreground Beyoncé as a powerful, dominant, diva figure. But in the nine years between the tours, developing stage technologies and changing audience expectations mean that, in larger spaces, the show has to place her at the centre of an expanded, more dynamic, and more all-encompassing spectacle.

But at the same time as these broader external and internal forces operate to shape and reshape the event, the audience's perception of what is theatrically appropriate for each band and artist functions both as a performative limitation (as argued above) and a guide to how the event should be shaped and interpreted. The audience, in other words, brings its social knowledge to bear on each event, in the way that the men sitting

behind us in Manchester did. As Mark Duffett noted, one of the things that motivates fans most strongly is a sense of direct engagement with the object of their veneration:

Perhaps the primary pleasure that unites fans with performances is simply enjoyment through engagement. This enjoyment is more than a passive process of consumption or reception. It involves the fan being active in suspending disbelief, making meaning and participating. There is a sense here in which performance sets the tone and fans, making meanings as they go, engage in various adaptive forms of counter-performance. At live music events, for example, these counter-performances are visibly and audibly expressed in ways that can include delightedly screaming, heckling, calling for attention, singing along and applauding.¹⁰

This is undoubtedly true; however, it could be argued that, live, the connection between fan and band is not simply a matter of performance and counter-performance. Fans respond, but they also shape and police themselves, the performers, and the event. This happens both consciously (the men in Manchester, giving my son a crash course in the dynamics of a Muse gig) and unconsciously (even though I was swept up in the general atmosphere of the event, my behaviour was entirely predictable – based on my own learned response to events like this). Our experience (and the experience of other audiences: see [Weinstein \(1991\)](#), [Cavicchi \(1999\)](#), [Fast \(2001\)](#), [Trier-Bieniek \(2013\)](#), [Kim \(2018\)](#)) could be described, not as a counter-performance, but as an integral part of the theatricality of the event.

This isn't simply demonstrated during moments of overt interaction; it is manifested throughout the performance, as the audience effectively demonstrates its ingrained, culturally determined understanding of the

event. During Kendrick Lamar's Glastonbury headlining performance in 2022, for example, people in the audience scream at the opening chords of 'Alright.' As soon as Lamar starts to rap, the crowd are with him, managing to negotiate even the fastest parts of his flow. Lamar's and the audience's performances are so synchronised that the rapper can drop out of the track all together, leaving the crowd to fill in words and lines. When the track's hook comes, the audience move as one, exactly matching the beat. There is even a moment in the performance where Lamar drops his head and laughs, as if acknowledging the crowd's performative competence. Moments like this – moments of co-creation, where responsibility for the event is shared between artist and crowd – demonstrate that, in popular music performance, the audience does not observe the inherent theatricality of the event. Rather, the audience is a full participant in that theatricality. This is itself learned behaviour, a style of interaction that has evolved over time in response to the evolution of the form. Lamar's audience have not been instructed in the need to ape the rapper's flow. They do so, because popular audiences have themselves learned, over time, from other audiences, from their own behaviour (individually and communally), and from the society that surrounds them, all about their role in the event. The tuition might not be as overt as it was for my son in Manchester in 2016, but however the lesson is learned, the idea that there are correct ways to respond to specific bands and artists, to styles, and to genres is a key component of the audience's own inherently theatrical response to the event.

As I have noted above, this book will deal primarily with one aspect of live performance – albeit one that has been an important part of the live event since the late 1960s (and which also formed part of previous live shows, although, as I will argue, to a lesser extent). It will look at the intersection between the performance of live music and those elements of

live events that can be described as theatrical: stage lighting, choreography, the placement of the human body in a designed space. I will examine the relation between popular music performance and commonly held notions of theatricality; trace the evolution of theatrically inflected performances during a crucial period in popular music history, from the late 1960s through to the mid-1970s (a period during which all of the component theatrical elements in contemporary music performance first developed); examine the role of changing technologies and developing genre expectations on both the artists and the audiences; discuss the creation of personae in performance, as something which stretches well beyond the figure of the individual performer; and I will end by examining the role of narrative in popular music performance. From the outset, however, it is worth remembering that the events I'll be discussing are shaped by the interaction of the complex forces I've described above, and it would be very hard to argue that one or two of these forces are more important than the others. Rather, they are all interconnected, and they operate from the ground up – from the interaction of people, all in their various ways motivated, and all in their various ways engaged in performance. In the MEN, in 2016, my son wasn't simply witnessing a performance, nor was he simply learning how to be an active observer. Rather, he was learning his performative role – his part in the unfolding theatricality of the event.

Notes

1. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1096424/live-music-industry-revenue-worldwide/> ↗
2. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/12730-no-line-on-the-horizon/> ↗
3. A cheap family car, made in East Germany from 1957 to 1991. ↗

4. <https://www.workandmoney.com/s/highest-grossing-concert-tours-ed51a7b3f92c4afb> ↵
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2023/dec/08/how-much-taylor-swift-eras-tour-money-earnings> ↵
6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/09/arts/music/taylor-swift-eras-tour-ticket-sales.html> ↵
7. <https://alterock.net/muse-forbes-top-20/> ↵
8. Frith, Simon et al. *The History of Live Music in Britain, Volume 3: from Live Aid to Live Nation* Routledge 2021, p. 255. ↵
9. Created by the British designer Es Devlin. ↵
10. Duffett, Mark *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* Bloomsbury 2013, p. 296. ↵

1

FRAMING POPULAR MUSIC PERFORMANCE

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Introduction

As noted in the introduction, the types of popular music performances under discussion here are inherently complex. They are designed to create a response in the audience that is simultaneously affective (if not purely visceral), communal, and aesthetic, and in doing so, they have come to deploy elements that we associate with theatre (design, lighting, props, and characterisation). But, as I'll go on to argue, they do not wholly conform to the structures, either of conventional theatre or of other types of performance (immersive work, devised work, site-specific work, and so on). Clearly, they are a type of popular performance – but that term itself doesn't provide much of a template; a popular performance can be thought of as a performance that has, as its goal, the need to provoke an immediate, favourable response from its audience, but this is a definition so loose as to be almost entirely unhelpful. To begin to account for the complexity of these events, we have to think about the range of meanings the audience might be expected to bring to bear on the performances themselves, and how the performances work towards the point at which an audience can make an appropriate kind of embodied sense of the show. In other words, we should think carefully about not just the way that audiences frame the

events (to borrow a term from Philip Auslander), but also the way in which performances themselves create frames through which they can be experienced. As an introduction to the argument, I will begin with a celebrated moment of performance – celebrated, that is, by fans who are culturally equipped to understand the way that this particular moment is framed.

***The Wall* live, 12th May 2011**

The audience who had tickets to see *The Wall* at the O2 Arena in London in 2011 were, one can assume, already aware at least to an extent that the show they were going to see would be both spectacular and historically notable. Roger Waters had revived the original stage show, which had been performed by his former band Pink Floyd, in a small number of venues in 1980; technological and logistical developments now meant that it could be treated as though it were simply another large-scale event. The tour ran from 2010 to 2013, taking in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand; overall, it grossed \$458,673,798 – the sixth highest gross of any tour in the 2010s. Audiences were drawn to the performances both because they would hear one of the most successful albums of the 1970s played end to end, and also because they would see a performance that replicated – indeed, that extended – an original show that had itself become part of popular music history. One might say that, for the audiences coming to see *The Wall*, the performance was largely predetermined, well before the first notes were played. In other words, for the spectators (or at least, for what we might assume would be a significant proportion of them), the narrative contained within the album would be familiar, the original staging of the narrative would be familiar, and the

place of the album in the fractious history of the band would be familiar – perhaps not completely, but at least in part.¹

Given the original album's and tour's place in the history of the band, it is likely that this knowledge would extend to key moments in the original performance – moments that the revived show replicated. On the 12th May 2011, one of these moments was indeed replicated, but with a crucial, unique alteration. 'Comfortably Numb' (the last track on the third side of the original double album) is a dialogue between a doctor (played by Waters) and Pink, *The Wall*'s central character. During the song, the doctor administers drugs that help get the near catatonic Pink back on stage. By the time the show reached the track, the stagehands had finished assembling *The Wall*'s defining image – a blank, white wall that stretched right across the performance space, forming a barrier between the musicians and the audience. Waters, as the doctor, sang the song's verses in front of the wall, and in the original performance David Gilmour, Pink Floyd's guitarist, not only sang the choruses but also played an elongated guitar solo while precariously perched on a flight case, placed on a hydraulic platform which was raised high above the stage floor. 'Comfortably Numb' finishes with an elongated showcase of a guitar solo, and in the original shows Gilmour played, illuminated only by spotlights, on an otherwise dark stage.

In 2011, the moment was restaged, in a rather more elaborate (and secure) fashion. Waters (whose performance on the 2010–2013 tour oscillated between the roles of doctor and frontperson) stood in front of the wall, on which was projected a swirling grey pattern that shifted slowly as he sang the verses. Gilmour's part was split between the vocalist Robbie Wyckoff and the guitarist Dave Kilminster, both on rather safer versions of the original hydraulic lift. On the 12th May, however, when the spotlight illuminated the musician on top of the wall the audience saw, not Wyckoff

and Kilminster, but Gilmour in the same position he occupied in the original performance. His appearance on the tour had been trailed, but the precise date of that appearance was unknown, and at least a proportion of the audience would know that his presence was both significant and unlikely, given the acrimonious relations between Waters and the band he used to lead.² Gilmour's appearance, one might say, placed a new and different perspective – we might say, a new narrative frame – on this particular performance. It is fair to assume, as I noted above, that the audience would be aware of at least some of those framings, given both Pink Floyd's cultural position and the particular nature of the material. *The Wall*, in common with a number of 1970s concept albums, had a coherent narrative structure. It traced the gradual breakdown of a musician whose biography bore striking similarities to Waters own life; 'Comfortably Numb' represented the point at which the character was at his most alienated. The song, and the staging, implies a distancing (in fact, a profound rupture) between *The Wall*'s central character and the world around him. Gilmour's appearance, on the other hand, was a moment of connection; at least a partial, performative reconciliation between two famously irreconcilable men. The moment, therefore, could be read in two contradictory ways, both of which were, for those who came to see the performance and who were aware of these competing narratives, entirely legitimate.

These narrative frames were joined on the night by what one might term performative frames. Both in the original performances and in the 2010 tour, the staging created an all-encompassing narrative frame, albeit one that developed in line with another frame (the development of staging technologies, and the audience's shifting expectations). In the 1980s shows, the wall was blank and dark; on the 2010–2013 tour, it was an active,

malleable part of the staging. For example, as Gilmour soloed high above him, Waters beat on the bricks with his fists. The last blow was to a brick in the middle of the wall, and the impact seemed to shatter the grey background, revealing a stylised, vibrantly coloured sunset, which was in its turn obscured by dark rising pillars. The moment was spectacular and would have been equally as effective on any other night. On this particular performance, however, the narrative framing contained in the staging, however striking, was overshadowed by the narrative frame, created by the musicians visible on stage; and by yet another framing – in this case, by these particular musicians' relation to the particular track being played. In Gilmour's case, it was not simply that he played the solo he originated – it was that the solo itself, on the night, was both identifiably based on the original, and also unique to Gilmour as a musician, and to the performance on the 12th May. Footage of other gigs on the tour showed that Kilminster's solo was comprised of phrases and runs derived from Gilmour's original version, delivered with the kind of competence expected of a professional musician. At the O2 however, the audience heard a less polished, slightly less fluent rendition of what was essentially the same solo (some of the notes were glitched, and toward the end the bottom E-string of Gilmour's Stratocaster drifted out of tune, and had to be adjusted), but any technical issues were themselves far less important than the sheer physical fact of Gilmour's presence, and the fact that the audience watched as he recreated a key musical moment in the history of the band.

The performance, then, communicated meanings that went beyond the narrative of the album, or of 'Comfortably Numb' as a track. At this point, it is worth pausing, to take account of the number of ways in which the performance can be framed; that is, the number of ways that it lays itself open to interpretation (as I've noted above). First, there is the framing of the

song, as a story in itself and as a key track on a very successful album. Then there is the narrative frame of the performance; *The Wall* is still reasonably unusual, in that it has a definite, easy to follow storyline,³ but that storyline is itself open to performative reinterpretation (for example, Waters in 2011 does not occupy the same place in the story as he did in 1980; the 1980s medic has been superseded by the 2011 medic/rockstar). The personnel, and their relation to each other, constitutes yet another interpretive frame.

Wyckoff and Kilminster, both of them adept musicians, were clearly subordinate to Waters; they are session musicians, and he is the star of the show. When Gilmour appeared on stage, the balance between the musicians altered. Gilmour is as important in the history of Pink Floyd as Waters; Waters might be responsible for most of the band's lyrics, but Gilmour was the band's lead vocalist, and his guitar style was an integral part of Pink Floyd's musical identity. After Waters' acrimonious departure, Gilmour took over the leadership of the band. In this case, the very fact that Waters and Gilmour are as close together as the staging allows is itself significant. The scenographic arrangement suggests another framing – at least a partial reconciliation between two musicians, positioned onstage as equals, and as components in an evolving stage image. Finally, the fact that Gilmour sings the choruses (as on the original recording) and plays a solo that, as fans would recognise, frames him as a partial author of the music and part of a partially reconstituted Pink Floyd, at least for the duration of the track.

The performance was widely reported at the time, and continues to be cited as unique and remarkable ([Classic Rock](#), in 2022, called it 'a moment of the purest magic'⁴). Its fame rests, not so much on the bare facts of the performance (which, aside from Gilmour's presence, exactly replicates performances of the track in venues across the world, from 2010 to 2013), but on the intersection of all the framing narratives I describe above. These

framing narratives do not cohere into a performative unity; in fact, in some ways they contradict each other. They are not all immediately accessible to the audience (as access to them depends on a level of knowledge of the band and the album which can be presumed, given the nature of the event, but which cannot be taken for granted). Gilmour's unannounced appearance is, therefore, a useful example of how these complex, intersecting framings operate. It exposes the way in which live popular music events generate meanings; and it also demonstrates that those meanings, and the way in which they intersect, are by their nature frequently contradictory and porous. As with Muse at the MEN, the various frames that surround the event do not necessarily sit comfortably, one on another, but the idea of framing is important precisely because it provides a means by which the audience can make sense of a complex, but undeniably theatrically potent event.

Framings

Up until relatively recently, live music was surprisingly unrepresented in popular music studies; there were exceptions (Allan Moore's work; Susan Fast's writing on Led Zeppelin; Deena Weinstein on Metal as a performance genre; Philip Auslander's work on liveness and the creation of performance personae; Daniel Cavicchi's work with Springsteen fans (1999), Simon Frith's [*Performing Rites*](#) (1998)), but in general those coming to write about popular music were either trained in musicology or in cultural studies, and as such were rather more inclined to examine popular music as text (and, because of this, to provide analyses of that text, wherever it could be found – either in the score, the lyrics, or in the recording). Those approaching the field from cultural studies (in the tradition of Hebdige et al.) saw music as the expression of social trends and

tensions, and because of this they were drawn, not to the music itself, but to the networks that sustained it and to the cultural meanings embedded in the way that music was produced, disseminated, and consumed.

Over the past two decades, however, a growing body of literature in popular music studies has focused more closely on live performance. One might cite, amongst others, Ian Inglis' edited volume on iconic performances (2006); Chris Anderton's work on live performance and festivals (2019, 2021); Robert Kronenburg, on the evolution of performance spaces (2021); Edgar et al. on arena concerts and McKay on pop festivals (both [2015](#)); Auslander's work, noted above; Frith et al.'s multi-volume history of live music in Britain (2013–2021), and Steve Waksman's exhaustive work on live music in the US (2022); Fabian Holt's [*Everyone Loves Live Music*](#) (2021); and Mazierska et al.'s [*The Future of Live Music*](#) (2021). All in all, one might say that in popular music studies there has been something of a turn to the live, which mirrors the shifts in popular music production and consumption described in the introduction. Partly, this has meant that previously existing discussions over popular music now fully embrace live performance. Debates over the complex question of authenticity, the influence of generic codes and tropes, and the relation between artist, material, and audience are part of the current discourse in the field. To these debates, we can now add a welcome interest in the networks that have built up around live performance and the complex, evolving histories of those networks. This is a useful corrective to previous discussions, as Frith et al. noted in the preface to the first of their three-volume history:

Our starting point here is that most present accounts of 'the music industry' (which are often derived from Adorno's analysis in the 1940s of 'the culture industry') over-privilege the recording sector at the

expense of the sector in which most musicians in all genres have been located historically; the live arena.⁵

After all, as they go on to point out, musicians spend – have always spent – a large part of their professional lives involved in these networks. Frith et al.'s research, and the research of other academics over the past decade, has definitely helped to rebalance what was a rather skewed approach to the dissemination of popular music: a counterweight to the argument put forward by Theodore Gracyk, for example, that recorded popular music is necessarily more important to any analyses of the form, and that live performance is always secondary to the recording.⁶ The preface also makes the valuable point that the study of live performance is always also the study of place; after all, venues and audiences are rooted within wider communities of cultural production and reception. To talk about live music, and the way in which the form has developed, is also inevitably to talk about processes of cultural change at both the micro and macro level. The impact of digital technology, for example, is something we experience globally (as it changes consumption habits and revenue streams worldwide) and in our everyday lives (as the local HMV closes, and specialist shops selling vinyl open; as we wait for online tickets to go on sale, rather than queueing at the box office; as we watch footage posted online, before we go to the gig itself).

Moreover, as Fabian Holt has noted, it is not simply that live music is bound up in networks of musical performance and reception. As I noted in the introduction, live music is big business, and this has implications both for the look and shape of the performance, and for the wider culture within which the performances take place. Holt argues that the very term live music itself now denotes a type of interaction which is bound up in the industrial processes of neoliberal Capitalism:

The term “live music” has become institutionalized through powerful myths of capitalism and now challenges the position held by the term “musical performance.” As the British concert industry began to promote itself as a live music industry in the late 1980s, the generic conception of the live music commodity became an instrument of industrial exploitation. The term was adopted by the media, governments, and scholars whose shared enthusiasm for the trend explains a certain ignorance of its cultural and historical dimensions.⁷

Recent work, already cited, by Frith et al. and Waksman has gone some way towards addressing the ignorance Holt describes. At the heart of this work is the conception of live music as part of an evolving network of income streams, either supporting or supported by other branches of the music and culture industries. In doing so, this work fits squarely within what has become the dominant paradigm of live music discourse, at least within popular music studies. This paradigm has been neatly described in a recent summary chapter on theorisations of the live event:

The different theoretical perceptions ... all share a concern with the social relationships that both shape and are constituted by live music performances... These theories underscore that local music infrastructures of venues, festivals and organisations are essential for the cultural form, because the performance always takes place *somewhere*. Indeed, an important factor in live music’s appeal is its immediacy and social experience. Nevertheless, live music theories are increasingly challenged to also conceptualise the global and mediated nature of the live music industry.⁸

In popular music studies, as this quote suggests, music performance is seen both as something which is localised and as something which at the same time mirrors and demonstrates the shifting nature of performance as a commodity – as something which can be packaged and sold on the promise of a unique interaction, but which by its nature is also bound up in the wider commodification of cultural artefacts of all kinds. For example, *The Wall* as an album might contain songs that rail against the objectification of the individual musician, but it is a cultural artefact whose success can be measured in the number of units shifted. As an album and a stage show, it might attempt to dramatise the soul-destroying grind of the music business, but in 2011, its restaging was, for Waters and for all those involved, a very astute business move.

Popular music studies, therefore, provide a number of very useful correctives to any view of the popular music concert as primarily driven by a concern for aesthetic coherence. This is an industry in which live performance only exists in its current form because, for the larger groups, it is profitable, or it could contribute (by promoting the band's or artist's work) to their bottom line. On what one might term the macro level, for the most successful groups this means that touring is now an internationally networked system, relying on the interaction of complex chains of interconnecting industries. On the micro level, the shifting status of live music changes both the networks through which live music reaches an audience (as Holt notes, one of the things that it does is to hollow out local music scenes – as changing patterns of consumer spending, audience engagement, and industry growth tend to favour the development of larger spaces). And on both the macro and the micro level, in the interaction between musician, audience, and industry, the growing significance of revenue from live music itself acts as a spur towards technological

innovation. Put simply, the budgets available for large-scale touring, and the need to produce something appropriate to the artist, suitable for the venue, and tailored to the audience's expectations of the event, mean that groups and artists, when they go on tour, are likely to be early adaptors of any new staging technology that can be scaled up to fit large spaces and is robust enough to survive the rigours of touring (see, for example, the discussion of U2 in the introduction). However, the technologies and staging choices that artists and bands make cannot be governed merely by what is available or (if their budget stretches to it) what is innovative. As the examples above demonstrate, any performance will necessarily exist within a number of intersecting frames, and it is in the artist's and the industry's interest to at least be aware of which framings are appropriate and which are not.

Let us, then, turn to the question of framing, in relation to live music, and examine it in more depth. In his 2021 book, *In Concert*, Philip Auslander provides a useful application of frame theory to the study and practice of popular music performances. The term derives, as Auslander notes, from the work of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson and the sociologist Erving Goffman. Both Bateson and Goffman argued that, to make sense of our lived experience, we need to find a way of framing the world around us – that is, we need to corral that experience into a shape that allows us to assimilate the information it contains. Bateson suggested (in a passage Auslander quotes) that this way of dealing with the world was analogous to an artist placing a frame around a picture:

The picture frame tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame... A frame is metacommunicative. Any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame,

ipso facto gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame.⁹

For Bateson and Goffman, we frame events not simply so that we can make sense of them, but also so that we can understand our roles in them and adjust our behaviour appropriately. In popular music performance, this type of social knowledge is gained through the kind of complex social interactions my son first encountered at the MEN; experiences of various types of live performance enable us to understand that some forms of interactive response are legitimate, and some are not. These framings not only determine the responses of the audiences, but also the performative responses of musicians, the generic expectations that govern our responses to the event, the musicians' relation to the technologies that surround them, and the wider social framings that surround gigs.

In Concert is a very useful exploration of the complex interaction of frames and narratives that shape our understanding of those performances. However, even the relatively brief summary I have just given suggests that, if we are to follow Auslander and consider live performance as an exercise in appropriate framing, then we will necessarily have to consider the interaction of a very large number of framings that, taken together, orient the audience and musicians within the performance event, while also linking the specific performance to the wider world. For example: *The Wall*, as a performance, could not be separated from the history of *The Wall* as a successful album, or *The Wall* as a famous piece of rock performance history. In their turn, all of those frames cannot be separated from the various mythologies and iconographies that have encrusted themselves around Pink Floyd – as a significant band in popular music history, as a fractious group of individuals, as the exemplars of a particular style of music (Progressive Rock) and a particular time (the 1970s), and so on. We

can add to these framings associated with the venue (some audience members will have a previous association with the venue; some may not, so their encounter with it will furnish them with a new interpretive frame), framings associated with the audience's and the musicians' general understanding of similar events, the audience's and the musicians' understanding of and engagement with the performance history of the group or the artist, and so on.

Not all of these framings will be accessible to everyone equally; and no frame is stable – for example, the framing of Roger Waters as the work's author is more prominent in 2011 than it would have been in 1980, but the nature of that authorship would have changed, because the framing of Waters as an artist and a star had itself changed. Lastly, the performance itself added another frame; and this new frame itself would, for those aware of the history of the band, mean that previous framings would be reframed. As noted above, the interaction between all these frames can never be entirely codified, because every person involved in the event will have a different level of engagement and knowledge with the music, the artist, the event, and the audience. Finally, the performance itself – even one like *The Wall*, with a relatively clear narrative, and relatively clear characterisation – does not by its nature attempt to create a fictional world. The audience, therefore, does not eavesdrop on a created reality – the audience participates in a social event (which in itself involves the performance in a wider, and ever more uncodifiable, set of framings). It is not that all of this complexity renders the concept of frames as useful ways to think about live music useless – far from it. Rather it is that, if we are to discuss the particular type of theatricality involved in popular music performance, we need to begin with the idea that any such framings are complex, porous

(because they are shaped by, and shape, other ways of framing the event), and apt to shift, and shift radically, over time.

Scenographies, the event and the performer

One way, therefore, to think about the way theatricality works in live popular music performance is that it operates through the complex interaction of artistic, commercial, and social framings. However, it is worth saying that this is not an abstract concept; it's one that we can see, both in the organisation of the event itself and in the way we respond to that organisation. In what follows, I will argue that, first of all, the various framings through which live performance is both created and received are given physical shape in the layout and design of the performance space. From the 1970s onwards, the idea that the sets in which bands and artists perform should be bespoke (that is, consciously shaped around the audience's perception of the musicians and the contexts within which they operate) has become the default assumption, at least for musicians whose careers are significant enough to merit the necessary expenditure. As part of this, an industry grew up, during a key period in popular music history, with the express purpose of providing appropriate designs and technologies for touring (for more on this, see [Chapter 2](#)). From the first, however, those who created the sets for touring musicians found themselves having to accommodate the various framings that shaped the audience's perception of the artists. For example, Roger Dean designed album covers for the progressive rock band Yes, which framed their music in images that blended fantasy and science fiction. Commissioned to design the stage set for the band's 1974 tour (in support of the album *Tales from Topographic Oceans*), he created a fibreglass set that mirrored the fantastical image on

the album cover. He did so, not because he or the band wanted to create the impression of a coherent, fictional world in which the band could perform. He did so, because the frame of the band – its visual identity, and the images that created that identity – had to be superimposed on the frames of all the venues on the tour – because, aside from anything else, it was a visual signature that the audience might expect to see.

In other words, when we talk about framings in live performance we are talking about something that is manifested most clearly in the scenographic composition of the event. In many forms of theatre, the scenography aims to create the idea of a self-contained performance space, separate from the world the audience inhabit. In popular music, as, it could be argued, in many forms of popular performance, the scenographic elements have a different function; they are designed to include the audience. In his preface to the collection *Scenography Expanded*, Arnold Aaronson (in [McKinney and Palmer, 2017](#)) uses the term ‘expanded scenography’ to describe performances whose scenographic elements – light, design, and so on – are specifically designed both to illuminate and facilitate the performance, and to work beyond the confines of the proscenium arch stage:

Viewed in this way, scenography serves as a tool ... for understanding Carnival, theme parks, art installations, site-specific performances, ritual and festival performances, sporting events, architecture, processions and parades, political events and even urban streetscapes. ... But it goes even further. The visual, spatial and aural fields (and occasionally the olfactory and tactile components) serve to organise – through intentional creation or by the active foregrounding of perception – the relationship of spectators to an event, space or object.^{[10](#)}

Aaronson's definition fits habitual scenographic practices in live music; scenography in live music performance tends to work to include the audience, either by providing them with constantly changing visual and spatial information or by breaking or blurring the dividing line between the artist and the audience. The scenography of live music performance is, it could be said, expressive from the outset, and it is expanded from the outset. That is, within the unfolding of a live music event, scenographies are simultaneously a thing done and a doing (that is, a series of images that are in transition from the moment they are established), and they are also designed to structure the spectator's active participation in the performance. To use the terminology already established in this chapter, Aaronson's definition suggests that expanded scenography can be thought of as the means through which the framing of live music performance can be made manifest, to the performers and to the audience (for a detailed discussion of the use of scenographic elements in performance, see [Chapter 3](#)).

However, although the various framing devices employed in performance aim to organise the spectator's perception, they cannot control that perception; anyone who has attended a gig knows that there are other, competing factors (buying refreshments, going to the bathroom, dealing with the crowd, using a mobile to film the show) that can draw the audience's attention away from the stage. Neither can they accommodate all of the visual and aural information the spectator receives. To pick an example, the opening of Pink's *Beautiful Trauma* tour (2018–2019) is a knowingly ironic exercise in camp theatrics. Before the show starts, a giant shocking pink curtain obscures the stage. A man in a suit jacket and three-quarter length trousers walks out in front of the curtain, brandishes a recorder (in the same shade of pink as the curtains), and starts to play along with the 20th Century Fox movie theme. He does so badly, the recorder

squeaking and sliding off key, but he brandishes the instrument as though he were a virtuoso. As the theme finishes, ‘Get This Party Started’ cuts in, the curtain drops, the stage and auditorium are flooded with pink light, and Pink takes centre stage, swinging from a giant chandelier. At the back of the stage is a giant ellipsoidal video screen, carrying the image of a stylised, pink ballroom, illuminated by twisted lampposts that look like something out of Dr Seuss (their physical counterparts occupy centre stage at the song’s beginning).¹¹ Pink herself – her physical presence – is a relatively small part of the onstage picture; the audience do see her, but they see her in close-up as her mediated image is carried on screens on either side of the stage.

The set, therefore, works in Aaronson’s terms as an example of an expanded scenography. For a moment, the stage, the lighting, the sound design, and the whole world of the performance are Pink. This moment also covers the audience. The lighting design for the show allows light to spill over into (in fact, to be directed towards) the crowd, drawing them into the overall scenography of the event. Here, processes of mediatisation don’t so much overwhelm the performer as brand the whole space with the performer’s identity. For example, the lighting, as described above, is designed not just to support the musicians’ and the star’s performance, but as a performance in itself; it breaks the barrier between the stage and the auditorium, uniting them rather than dividing them. It could be said that the lighting state is itself scenographic, in the terms outlined by Katherine Graham:

This is light that moves beyond supplying atmosphere or mood and becomes an active contributor to the complex processes of meaning-making in performance, and therefore aligns with contemporary definitions of performance design. Scenographic light is creative rather

than responsive; while it may operate constructively with other elements within performance, it is actively expressive in its own right. ... [Scenographic] light becomes expressive through its active role in performance, and that this expressivity is a process of doing. [Elin] Diamond's concept of continual drift is important here; each moment of performance is a kind of thing done that immediately recedes into a doing as the next emerges. Similarly, each complete lighting state, or cue, is both a thing done and a point in transition to the next.¹²

The description above suggests not only that the performance space is appropriately framed, but that the framing is one that suggests a series of closely interrelated meanings, about the artist and her material, and that it is presented in such a way as to completely overwhelm all other possible meanings, for Pink and for her audience. The lighting, the staging, the costuming, the performances, and the figure of Pink herself are designed in effect to flood the space, effacing all other possible interpretations.

Scenographically, we are in Pink's world.

However, not everything that happens in the design of the performance can be neatly assimilated in an overall design concept. What the audience see and hear suggests a performance world that is both expanded (to use Aaronson's term) and, as Rachel Hann points out, capable of a number of interpretations, without jeopardising the scenographic organisation of the event:

...[If] something can be choreography and choreographic, performance and performative, theatre and theatricality, dramaturgy and dramaturgical, film and filmic, then something can also be scenography and scenographic... An example of this might be a Christmas tree. One reading of this might be that it is a highly

scenographic object, but it has not necessarily been created by stage scenographers. This approach positions ‘scenography’ as something that ... occurs as part of an ‘aesthetic performance’. Things or events that have similar place orientating qualities, but occur beyond this frame, would be deemed scenographic.^{[13](#)}

As the Pink example demonstrates, the design elements within the performance are active and creative – performers themselves, working alongside the musicians in the realisation of the performance. Using Hann’s argument, however, we can further extend the idea of an active scenography to all the elements within the performance space, whether they are part of the conscious design of the event, or not. To give an example of this: during the first song, Pink’s musicians are positioned upstage, to the left and right of the central performance area. They are dressed in black, as she is; an important performance choice – at this stage, Pink is, in terms of costuming, both the star (in that she is sharply distinct from the troupe of dancers that surround her) and part of the band, and therefore one of the craft workers who make the performance possible. The band’s guitarist, another craft worker, is on the audience’s left. Although dressed in black, he looks, in relation to the other performers, somewhat out of place. His hair is long enough to qualify him for membership of Mötley Crüe in the 1980s, and at various points in the performance he adopts the kind of performative gestures associated with musicians from that band, genre, and era. In particular, when called upon to take a solo he defaults to the open-legged stance of the heroic 1980s hair metal guitarist. The guitar he plays at the gig’s opening is a Sunburst Gibson Les Paul. For those in the audience familiar with the iconography of the electric guitar, the Les Paul is itself an expressive scenographic element, but not one that fits neatly into the camp extravagance of the rest of the performance space. Les Pauls are associated,

in popular music history, with the serious, technically proficient guitarist. They have a long history in genres adjacent to, but not completely matching, the type of music associated with Pink (in popular music history they are associated with musicians in hard rock, metal, blues, and to a lesser extent indie). In terms of the image they present, therefore, both the guitarist and the guitarist's instrument fit the overall design (because they demonstrate that the music the audience hears is being crafted for them live) and stand apart from it (because they seem to have slipped in from another performative universe).

The guitarist's look does not fit neatly into the overall aesthetic of the performance space; neither does his behaviour. Pink is surrounded by dancers whose actions are tightly choreographed; her physical performance is also closely scripted, to the extent that in the opening song it takes precedence over singing. When she reaches the line 'you'll be kissing my ass,' she is hanging from the chandelier; she leaves the audience to fill in the lyrics and executes a tumbling fall from the chandelier to the stage. Against this, the guitarist behaves, not as a coordinated part of the choreography of the performance, but as a conscientious craftsman. During the performance, he concentrates on playing, looking down at his guitar and his pedalboard (the song requires that he makes precise use of the wah pedal). After he plays a short melodic lead line, based on the song's main melody, the guitar drops out altogether, leaving a substantial, but short-lived, hole in the performance mix. This is not because he has missed a cue or forgotten his part. The lead line over, he presses down on the wah pedal (most likely to switch it off), then moves to press down on another part of his pedalboard, to activate the tuner. His guitar retuned, he returns to the song.

These actions might not fit entirely comfortably into the overall design of the show, but they do fit into the general set of scenographic expectations audiences bring to popular music performance. Even if they don't have access to the detailed cultural information required to make a judgement about the kind of music associated with a Les Paul, they would be very likely to have a general awareness, both of the fact that the guitarist's general demeanour doesn't fit that of the main body of choreographed performers, and of the generic coding of a musician with long hair and guitar. His actions – moving between performative moments (the heroic stance) and what we might call craft moments (monitoring his playing and tuning his guitar) – are not part of the designed scenography of the event, but to borrow Hann's argument, they are clearly scenographic. They suggest, in this context, not something which contributes to the specific event, but something which places the event in a wider, more general, and entirely appropriate context. It demonstrates that, despite all the pre-arranged glitz, what is happening is the live creation of music, at a specific location, at a specific time.

Mediatisation, reception, and the audience

As the Pink gig demonstrates, expanded scenographic elements are used effectively to flood the space, both aurally and visually; but in doing so they necessarily include elements that frame the event in ways that will always escape the artist's aesthetic control. As I'll discuss in more depth later, an expanded scenography designed to (as far as possible) fill out the venue was a change that was effectively forced on the industry by the expanded scale of the venues that bands and artists used in the 1970s. Robert Kronenburg, writing about his first experience of an arena gig (Bob Dylan,

at Earls Court in London in 1978), gives a very clear indication of why this was necessary:

Dylan's show in 1978 was my first arena event, and my overwhelming feeling was one of remoteness from the stage. Sitting on the floor three quarters of the way back, Dylan and his band were just dots in the distance. The music was loud enough but muddy to say the least. During a break I walked up to the front just so I could see what the stage area looked like. The circus performers doing their thing in the entrance hall didn't make up for my general disappointment. In the early days of these large arena shows, many in the audience must have felt like me.^{[14](#)}

Big, flexible, empty spaces needed to be filled, for crudely commercial reasons; the lure of the star might be enough to sell tickets (especially if the star was, like Dylan in the 1970s, rather reclusive). However, this could not in itself guarantee a good experience, and this in turn would imperil the already fragile economics of live performance. Expanded scenographies bridged the gap between performer and audience by transforming the space – reshaping it into an environment that effectively transmitted key elements of the performer, the genre, the (embedded or overt) narrative contained within the performance to an audience already primed to understand and contextualise those elements. This is still, by and large, the underlying impetus behind stage design in the 21st century. Es Devlin, the designer responsible for a number of technologically elaborate touring sets (she designed the set for Beyoncé's *Formation* tour, described in the introduction), sees making sure that the staging reflects the performer as a key part of her brief:

Devlin has made large scale touring stage sculptures in collaboration with Beyoncé, Kanye West, Adele, U2, The Weeknd, Lorde, Pet Shop Boys, in London. In all these shows she tries to study the artist's work and brings to life, pieces of memories and incidents of their childhood or life that inspired them to put it in their work. For example, for the Kanye West concert, there were two parts of the stage raised 5 meters above the level where the audiences would stand and watch. Es's idea was that the audiences treat these rappers as someone whom they can look up to, thus, symbolizing their experience of what they feel about their artists in their minds.¹⁵

Mediatisation transforms the space; but rather than diminishing the performer's identity, it expands it; and not just in the larger spaces. The venue becomes, as far as is possible, a blank slate, on which the show inscribes a theatricalised, performative version of the current narratives surrounding the music and the artist. As noted above, one can say that mediatisation in popular music performance is bound up with a drive towards the scenographic: the creation of a separate, designed space that is marked out for a particular performer and a particular performance.

However, the process of mediatisation, and the theatrical and performance technologies that support it, also facilitates what Hann terms above the scenographic interpretation of the performance. This happens in a variety of ways. Firstly, and most obviously, there are those moments where the mediatisation breaks down (a good recent example is Kraftwerk, in Poland in 2022;¹⁶ the smoothly integrated visual and musical flow of the set was interrupted by a comprehensive technological failure during 'The Robots'¹⁷). At these points, the performer becomes an extension of the audience, waiting, as they wait, for the technology to be fixed; and at this point, the technology – the lighting frames, the PA system, the inert mass of

the digital screens – stands in a different relation to the space.

Paradoxically, given the functional design of many medium and large-scale venues, technology whose structure is revealed when it breaks down, or technology viewed before the performance begins, is more likely to look at home (that is, to seem to share the industrial or functional aesthetic) of the venue. At these moments, the audience might be said to inhabit a different space, but this in itself does not need to disrupt the event completely.

Rather, what happens is that the performance is reframed, but this reframing operates within a performance space that is not designed to give the theatricalised illusion of a separate reality. Less jarringly, the moments when a musician moves from the performative to other modes of engagement (much as Pink's guitarist did) also constitute moments where design (the placement of the performer squarely within the aesthetic frame of the event) gives way to the scenographically extended (the performer displays themselves as either in control of their craft, or as utilising a competing or complementary set of generic performance markers). These moments are far more common than technological failure, and they are more likely to be easily assimilated by the audience.

Lastly, the audience itself is the largest scenographic element within the space. As I have noted, lighting and stage design now actively include the audience; lighting states are designed to illuminate them (and increasingly to convert them into part of the design), and staging now routinely creates opportunities for a number of complex performer/audience interactions. This can either be in the form of a B-stage (a small stage in the middle of the performance space, which can be reached in various ways – via a catwalk, or by processing through the crowd, or memorably, during U2's *PopMart* tour, in a mobile, lemon-shaped mirrorball) or by placing the stage at the centre of the performance space (as did Yes on the *Tormato* tour, or as

Muse did in 2016). Some stage sets incorporate both approaches: BTS, at Wembley stadium in 2019, used a square B-stage (linked to the A-stage by a broad catwalk) which was big enough to count as the main performance space (for more on BTS and K-pop, see [Chapter 4](#)). Sometimes, though, the B-stage can be tiny; during the DAMN tour, Kendrick Lamar performed part of the set on a small platform in the middle of the auditorium. The sets are, therefore, designed to facilitate a performative interaction between the performers and the audience, but the nature of that interaction is dependent on the way that relation is framed – and, as noted above, framing is a complex matter. That interaction can be partly incorporated into the aesthetic design of the event, as it is, for example, during Coldplay’s *Music of the Spheres* tour in 2022. But at these moments, the musicians effectively declare an allegiance, not to the aesthetic design of the space, but to the expanded scenographic space they share with the audience, and to all the complex framings that shape and animate that space.

However, even given these and other practices on the part of the event’s designers, the audience will always escape complete incorporation; audience behaviours in popular music performance do not draw on agreed codes of correct behaviour in the same way as most theatre audience behaviours do.¹⁸ Such codes do operate, but they are more akin to those found in other popular performance styles:

In popular performance the audience are addressed directly, and their presence is never forgotten. They sit – or stand – at the very heart of the performance, and the lines of communication between them and the performers always remain open. According to Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, for music hall singers, ‘the making of rapid connections with the audience was ... a condition of the kind of art in which they were engaged’ (1964: 58). Marinetti wrote in 1913 that,

‘The Variety Theatre is alone in seeking the audience’s collaboration. It doesn’t remain static like a stupid voyeur, but joins noisily in the action, in the singing, accompanying the orchestra, communicating with the actors in surprising actions and bizarre dialogues’.¹⁹

However (and to add to the complexity of the event) even this is not automatically a given. At some points within music performance, the audience will be excluded (at least in terms of the organisation of the design and lighting plan); a spotlight will illuminate a significant moment in the creation of a piece of music, and the rest of the auditorium will be dark. These will contrast with moments where the audience’s involvement is, it could be said, mandated; the musicians invite active engagement, the position of the musicians shifts to facilitate contact, the lights shine directly into the crowd. The audience’s reaction to these moments is, however, not entirely predictable; the performances of popular music audiences can be thought of as a form of creative agency, as defined by Breel:

A particular form of agency in participatory performance is agency of engagement, which is found in the decisions participants take about how to approach the participatory situation, the way to respond to invitations, and how they link their behaviour in and outside of the performance. Agency of engagement is inextricably linked to the space that it exists within, which is not quite real life or performance.²⁰

In other words, within the socially determined space of the performance venue, audiences are expected at some points to be active; at some points to be passive; and at some points to be the performance – but at no point can their response be entirely controlled or predicted. It is part of the nature of the popular music audience that their responses, and their engagement with

the performance, should be creative (and where possible, communal), rather than constrained.^{[21](#)}

One cannot even, necessarily, think of the audience as a unity; as Anderton and Goodge's research into the audience habits of progressive rock fans would seem to suggest, responses are as likely to be individual as they are social. The fans surveyed were keen to make clear that their response was, first and foremost, to the music created in front of them, and at least for some interviewees, this response took precedence over the social nature of the event:

As Pitts and Burland (2013) found among the jazz audiences they studied, there is comfort in being among 'like-minded listeners', but the meaning of the event is perhaps, for the progressive rock fans interviewed, more properly understood as a validation of the listeners themselves, of their musical tastes and the close, attentive and discriminating listening that is their preference. This is a preference that pays respect to the music itself, to the musicians who have the musical talent to bring that music alive on the stage in an authentic manner, and to the role that the music plays in their personal fandom.^{[22](#)}

This is a type of response that one might expect to find in responses to some kinds of music, particularly in genres where the technical prowess of the musician is part of the genre's defining features (as it is in Progressive rock, in some types of Metal, and in some types of Folk). However, it is also something that marks the intense engagement between fan and performer that typifies the response to singer/songwriters, or to an artist like Taylor Swift. All of this serves to remind us that the response to live music mirrors the response to recorded music, in that it is simultaneously communal and individual; and that the boundary between those two responses is in itself

inherently hard to fix. The audience for Muse in Manchester might have provided my son with useful pointers on appropriate gig behaviour, but their response, and his response, and, for that matter, my response to the event cannot be thought of as entirely communal. At some points, hard to fix but undoubtedly part of the process, we operated as individuals within a communal event, rather than as a community.

Conclusion: Floyd, Pink, and popular music theatre

In some respects, *The Wall* stands outside of the main developmental trends in popular music performance. Other artists have used the idea of a consistent narrative (Kanye West or Lady Gaga, to give two recent examples) or adopted characters and personae (The Weeknd and Beyoncé), but few have structured a show around one long suite of songs, containing a more or less consistent narrative. In other ways, though, it could be said that the 1980s version of *The Wall* wasn't so much an outlier as an indication both of the current state and the future direction of the form. The idea of a band working within a transformed space; the full integration of complex mediating technologies into the unfolding event; the overt positioning of the audience as part of the overall development of the performance – all of these elements are now so commonplace as to be entirely unremarkable. In fact, in the intervening time between its first performance and the 2010 tour, it could be said that *The Wall* moves closer to the condition of a conventional large-scale gig. Rather than an anonymous band subsuming itself in the impressive architecture of the show, *The Wall* had become a star vehicle; both in his performance and in the way the event framed that performance, this show belonged, unambiguously, to Roger Waters. The Wall itself, the *raison d'être* of the original performance, had now become a

standard piece of equipment for the larger-scale tour – a multimedia projection screen, carrying mediatised material relevant to the performance.

The Wall in 2010 was a standard show in another sense. It demonstrated, one might say, the complex, extended scenographies which all such events display. Firstly, it features transformed performers in a transformed space, but the nature of that transformation is unfixed. Waters shifts between enacting the character in the song, a performance persona that adopts tropes and gestures from the repertoire of the frontperson, and an element in the staging. Gilmour apparently doesn't move, and doesn't emote; but in doing so he performs David Gilmour, and in doing so performs the craft of the lead guitarist. Like Waters, he is also part of the design – his position onstage chosen to have the maximum visual impact. The performers do not settle into one register, or into one stable relationship with each other, with the nature of the event, or with the audience. Similarly, the setting itself is, in Auslander's terms, profoundly mediated; but rather than swamping the performers, it asserts their presence (*The Wall* is itself an iconic representation, both of Waters and of his former band). However, it contains both design and extended scenography; that is, it is both designed to carry a specific narrative and includes elements that indicate other meanings that the narrative itself doesn't contain. It has a large circular screen at the back of the stage, which had been a feature of Pink Floyd's live shows since the early 1970s; it contains the normal appurtenances of a band – the instruments, the amplification, and so on. The staging also extends out into the audience: at Earl's Court, banners hang from the auditorium ceiling, bearing the crossed red and black hammers that feature in the original artwork and videos for the album. The set might not have included a B-stage, but projecting the world of the performance out into the audience means that the audience itself becomes a scenographic feature of the

performance – suggesting and creating meanings that the performance couldn't fully control. Gilmour's appearance is treated, by most of the audience, as though it were the second coming (which, in terms of the back history of the band, it is); even though the solo he plays is, simply, not as good as other versions of the same piece of music, the very fact of his unpredicted presence sparks a response that might have been predicted but which cannot be fully accommodated. For a moment, effectively, *The Wall* stops being Waters' show. There is, in other words, enough in shows like *The Wall*, or in any other elaborate, gig, to enable us to use the term theatrical, because the performance aims for transformation, both in terms of the performer and in terms of the space.

However, the other associated elements of the performance, the technologies and mediations, the use of space, the nature of the relation between musician and audience, and the behaviour of the audience itself, work to create performances in which the idea of transformation is never entirely stable, and where the meanings created by the transformations, and the nature of the transformations themselves, are always liable to shift unpredictably from moment to moment. One of the ways of thinking about the opening of Pink's *Beautiful Trauma* tour is that it sets up a conflict between the performance, the space, and the audience. Using expanded scenographic techniques effectively to flood the space with signifiers of the star's identity suggests that, even if the audience is reliably partisan, their attention can't be presumed. It needs to be caught, held, and shaped as the performance develops. Also, in performances like Pink's, scenography and the scenographic exist in tension with each other. Everything the audience sees is designed, but they are not all designed by the same people; someone like Baz Halpin, who designed and directed *Beautiful Trauma*, is not responsible either for the look of, or the associations conjured by, a Les

Paul. Neither can even the most rigorous choreography include either those actions necessary to ensure that the music is produced, in real time; nor can it preclude actions which fit another type of choreography – movements, for example, that fit generic expectations rather than those suggested by the specific performance. If you place a hair metal guitarist into the Seussian nightmare of *Beautiful Trauma*, they will most likely remain a hair metal guitarist.

In both *The Wall* and *Beautiful Trauma*, and in other, similar tours, any analysis of the accumulated meanings associated with individual events and with the general practices of popular music performance has to take into account the complex, incommensurate framings that shape each show. As I've argued above, these performances have evolved in the way that they have, in order to meet a number of specific, practical imperatives. The space must be filled, visually and aurally; the design of the event has in some way to reflect both what the audience knows about the artist and, for some bands and artists, to show the audience something either as or more impressive than the previous tour. Staging choices have to respect the particular genre most associated with the artist (although many artists will perform work that switches or blends genres). The staging will also have to transform spaces that are, in many cases, designed to be anonymous, into spaces which could only, for the duration of the gig, house one particular band or one particular artist.

But in doing so, these events are subject to multiple, complex framings, and in their design and execution they necessarily have to account with the positioning and reactions of the audience, and with the unstable relationship between moments that are invariant (Pink hoisted above the audience; the virtual bricks falling as Waters beats the Wall with his fists) and those that by their nature can't be planned (Pink's guitarist tuning up; Gilmour's

appearance, and the slight slips and rephrasings of a familiar guitar solo). It is a simplification, obviously, but in most forms of theatre the audience are held at a distance from the world created by the text, and in many forms of popular performance the show is directed entirely out to the audience, who are treated as the responsive partners in a performative conversation. Live popular music performance exists somewhere between these two poles. It aims to involve the audience, and as such it is played out front, to the crowd, implicitly inviting a response. At the same time, it is subject to complex framings (musical, artistic, historical, social), and it is designed at least in part to create a separate, more conducive reality in which the performance can comfortably take place. However, given the nature of the event, this design will in practice have to accommodate both scenography and the scenographic, which will mean, inevitably, that crucial parts of the performance will be outwith the artist's control. The event is framed, and reframed, but the various framings will never fit neatly together. This means that, in practice, live music performance is both predictable and unstable; and, as I'll now go on to discuss, this disjunction was hard-wired into the form, during a crucial period in popular music history, from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s.

Notes

1. For more on *The Wall* in relation to Roger Waters' other work, see [Rose 2015](#); for more on the evolution of Pink Floyd's live work, see [Pattie 2022](#). ↵
2. The original tour of *The Wall* marked the point at which the band itself began to disintegrate: see [Blake 2008](#). ↵

3. Although narrative structures are more prevalent in live popular music performance than one might think, recently, Lady Gaga, The Weeknd, and The 1975, amongst others, have staged performances that have or that suggest a definite narrative structure. ↵
4. <https://www.loudersound.com/features/wish-you-were-there-roger-waters-david-gilmour-and-a-night-of-unexpected-magic> ↵
5. Frith et al. 2013, p. ix. ↵
6. Gracyk 1996. ↵
7. Holt 2021, p. 263. ↵
8. Van der Hoeven et al., in [Mazierska et al. 2021](#), p. 29. ↵
9. Bateson, G. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays on Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology* Jason Aaronson 1987, p. 144. ↵
10. Aaronson, A. 'Preface,' in McKinney, J. and Palmer, S. (eds.), *Scenography Expanded. An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design* Bloomsbury 2017. ↵
11. This description is taken from YouTube footage of the Toyota Center performance, Houston, Texas, 19 March 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6cUYg3W3MU&t=6125s>). ↵
12. Graham K. J. 'Active roles of light in performance design,' *Theatre and Performance Design*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 74–5, 2016. ↵
13. Hann, Rachel 'Notes on *Beyond Scenography*,' 2019. ↵
14. Kronenburg 2019, p. 177. ↵
15. <https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/know-your-architects/a668-breaking-stereotypes-es-devlin-on-dynamics-of-set-design/> ↵
16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITP87NrUULk> ↵
17. For more on Kraftwerk, see [Chapter 3](#). ↵

18. For a detailed analysis of audience behaviours in theatre, see [Heim 2016](#), [Sedgeman 2025](#). ↵
19. Double 2017, p. 16 (*Popular Performance*). ↵
20. Breel 2015, p. 44. ↵
21. For example: ThrowawaySurvivor24, posting on the TaylorSwift Reddit, provided fans with a spreadsheet outlining all of the communally agreed audience responses and interjections permissible during an *Eras* tour performance. ↵
22. Alone in the Crowd? Live Music Audiences and Individual Experience
Chris Anderton and Paul Goodge *Popular Music* (2025), 1–15, p. 12.
↵

2

THE CREATION OF POPULAR MUSIC THEATRE

1965–1975

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Introduction

In the mid-1970s, the folk-rock group Steeleye Span enjoyed a relatively short-lived period of commercial success. They had formed originally in 1969 at the behest of Ashley Hutchings, the bassist in Fairport Convention, who had left his first band to pursue, as he put it, an ‘obsession with traditional English music.’¹ Steeleye Span released three rather austere albums before Hutchings left; after his departure, the band’s direction shifted towards a more commercially acceptable brand of folk-rock. They had hit singles (‘Gaudete’ and ‘All Around My Hat’) and their albums (especially *All Around My Hat* from 1975) sold well. This meant that the band could take advantage of the touring circuits that had opened up in the UK and elsewhere in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They could play larger venues, and they could play them for longer; and like a lot of bands and artists of the period, they found themselves scaling up their performances, providing audiences with something more than simply the recreation of recorded music. David Bowie employed mime, Alice Cooper embraced *grand guignol*, The Osmonds demonstrated martial arts; Steeleye Span

chose folk drama, albeit folk drama with something of the glitter (and, it is fair to say, something of the regressive gender politics) of the 1970s:

...[Their] stage shows became increasingly flamboyant; the group sang the eerie 'Lyke's Wake Dirge' wearing medieval space suits woven from priests' cassocks, and wore costumes and masks (nurse, boy scout, commando, deep-sea diver, etc) for an entire mummers' play that was incorporated into the live sets. Adapted by Tim Hart [one of the band's founder members] the mummers' play tried to reinstate the nature symbolism of the traditional version, which Hart believed had been watered down over the years. This was an electronic multimedia event, with back-projected films, exploding fireworks and backing tapes.²

The band's excursion into folk drama didn't last long. It was critically unpopular, and in interviews afterwards the band's guitarist, Bob Johnson, was dismissive of the whole exercise (saying 'We experimented with theatrics. Some people liked it. Some people didn't. We decided we'd done it, had enough of it and went back to the music'³). Footage of one performance survives (from a show at the Festival Theatre, Adelaide), which demonstrates that the mummers' play was a rather awkward insertion into what was otherwise a standard early 1970s gig.⁴ The performances veer from enthusiastic to embarrassed, and the tone of the text vacillates between broad physical humour and awkwardly inserted popular cultural references that the audience in Adelaide don't quite get.⁵

Steeleye Span's theatrical experiment might not have lasted that long, but on the face of it the fact that they turned to theatre might in itself seem rather odd. Folk music performance, as it developed in the 1960s and early 1970s, had tended to eschew the overtly demonstrative. Everything tended

to be subordinate to the production of the music, with the audience positioned as witnesses, either to the song itself or to the technical skill of the musician, or both. Generically, Steeleye Span were the last band one might expect to leap on to the theatrical bandwagon – it was not what folk or folk-rock bands were supposed to do. The fact they did (and, in doing so, that they allied themselves with Bowie, Jethro Tull, Genesis, Kiss, the Osmonds, Parliament/Funkadelic, Frank Zappa, and all the other musicians who embraced theatrical elements in their gigs) suggests both that the trend towards overt theatricality was a key feature of live performance in the 1970s, and that, even in these relatively early days, bands and musicians were aware not just that the spaces they had to fill demanded more dressing, technical support, and performative flexibility, but that the performance material they chose had to be both appropriate to the venue and appropriate to the band. In other words, it suggests that, less than ten years after the beginning of the first experiments in lighting and stage design in popular music, the idea that theatrical techniques could be used in live performance was already very well established, even in the relatively static world of folk-rock. Even at this relatively early juncture, the live performance of popular music had become a complex negotiation between artist(s), audiences, genres, spaces, technologies, and cultures.

Changing stages: the 1960s

Steeleye Span's musicians learned their performative craft in the 1960s. Their formative experiences were therefore of a touring environment that was in many ways strikingly different from that of the 1970s and beyond. As Frith et al. point out, up until the later 1960s successful musicians in the UK made their money from live performance, but they did so in a

commercial context that actively militated against the development of complex staging techniques:

In these years [the 1960s] popular musicians had to spend disproportionate amounts of time on the road... Successful acts gradually did increase the amount they received from recordings, but it would be another 20 years before suitable larger venues became available to enable the more successful touring acts to make a reasonable income without such a heavy performing schedule.⁶

Even the most successful acts, both in Britain and the States, found themselves performing in conditions that made developing anything more than the most rudimentary stagecraft almost impossible. In the UK, the industry was geared towards the extraction of maximum profit from a musical style that might very well prove to be a passing fad, and for bands like The Beatles, for example, this meant getting the musicians in front of as many audiences as could be found. The record of the Beatles' touring schedules in 1963 and 1964 shows just how punishing their touring schedule was.⁷ Sets were also too short, or touring schedules too compressed, to justify the expense and complexity of bespoke touring equipment. By the time The Beatles had established themselves as the most important group of the decade, their sets usually comprised 10 or 11 songs, and lasted, in general, somewhere between 30 and 40 minutes. The equipment available to musicians was also not powerful or flexible enough to enable even the most dynamic performer to stamp their authority on the venue. The amount of technology that bands could carry with them was limited (by cost, by ease of transport, and because everything the band used had to be packed away and driven some distance to the next gig). Finally, if the band were popular enough to attract an excitable following, the

audience's enthusiastic reactions could quite easily swamp the music. When the Stones toured in the mid-1960s, Brian Jones used to irritate his fellow band members by playing the Popeye theme, rather than the songs in the set; his fellow band members could hear him, but the screaming fans could not.⁸

In North America, musicians faced similar issues, exacerbated (in the case of the more successful musicians) by the scale of the venues promoters booked for them. As popular music acts became more popular, it made economic sense for the artists, their management, and the concert promoters, to maximise the size of the audience. As in the UK, nobody knew how long what was seen as a craze for the new forms of youth music might last, so aiming to gather in as much money as possible before the bubble burst made sense. Live work was organised on a version of the pile-them-high principle; large-scale package tours had become common in the 1950s, and by the early 1960s successful musicians would find themselves playing the largest spaces available, alongside as many other performers as could be fitted into the night. To go back to The Beatles – the band played stadia as early as 1964. On the 22nd August of that year, they performed at the Empire Stadium in Vancouver, on a bill with The Righteous Brothers, The Exciters, Jackie DeShannon, and the Bill Black Combo (the performance started at 8:30 pm, which in itself gives an idea of how long each band would have had). The previous year The Beach Boys played the 'Show of Stars Spectacular' at the Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena. The gig, held on the 31st August, also included The Orlons, Jan and Dean, Andrea Carroll, Steve Alaimo, Soupy Sales, Johnny Fortune, Ray Sharpe, Marvin Gaye, the Righteous Brothers, the Olympics, Darlene Love, Wayne Newton, Little Eva, the Cookies, Mel Carter, Paul Peterson, Dee Dee Sharp, the Challengers, the Cornells, Tracy Dey, Dick & Dee Dee, Donna Loren,

Jackie DeShannon, and Rene Hall and his Orchestra. The performance started at 8 pm; as with The Beatles set lists for their performance are lost, but it is quite likely they would not have been extensive.

In this environment, understandably, many performers of necessity fell back on the only piece of theatrical equipment they could reliably control: their physical presence. Compare, for example, this account of Jerry Lee Lewis from 1958:

The most thunderous applause, of course, came when the show's top star, Jerry Lee Lewis, swung into action, this consisting largely of swinging his thick mane of yellow hair in a peculiar backward all-shook-up motion and gyrating his limbs. And the crowd went wild, letting loose with piercing screams, shouts and whistles, actually dancing in the aisles where possible and standing on the seats and yelling and clapping hands to a fare you well.⁹

with Little Richard in 1963:

Little Richard's dynamic debut on The Everly Brothers' package at Watford on Saturday proved that he is still the greatest, wildest performer on the beat scene.

Every Little Richard hit from 'Lucille' through to 'Good Golly, Miss Molly' was hurled at the audience, which stamped, raved and yelled with the artist.

The old, wild action was there and Little Richard's complete performance was charged with shouts of "All Right?" between songs. By the end of his act, he was stripped of all clothing except blue mohair pants.¹⁰

In both cases, the performers purposefully oversell the idea of physical engagement. Their performances are undoubtedly erotically charged, and are, also undoubtedly, conscious demonstrations of physical abandon; and they both have essentially the same, clear goal – to spark a matching response in the audience, one which is potentially as transgressive as anything that happens on stage. Interestingly, it is worth noting that the performances demonstrate that the theatricalisation of gender, sexuality, and race were integral parts of the physical vocabulary of at least some, highly visible artists. As David Shumway pointed in 2014, the success of Elvis Presley, and the artists that followed in his wake, ignited a furious debate, first in the US and then elsewhere, about the nature of post-war masculinity:

The notion that gender is a cultural construction was spread in popularized form, at least partly as a result of equally popularized versions of Sigmund Freud. The result was a perception of the “fragility of gender,” which was given expression in a deluge of articles about a “crisis of American masculinity” that in turn often seemed to be caused by a crisis in femininity.^{[11](#)}

For masculinity, one could, in this paragraph, substitute a crisis in the representation of both race and class. One of the reasons why performances like Lewis’ and Richard’s had such an impact was that they bound together a series of forbidden or excluded identity types – the ambiguous male (or the male on theatricalised display); the racially excluded; the culture of the disregarded poor – into a dynamically accessible and, for its critics, a worryingly popular form.

To say this, though, doesn’t mean that we should forget that such performances had, in the context of the time, an eminently practical purpose. A performer, developing their craft in the 1950s and early 1960s,

could not guarantee that the event itself would hold the audience's attention. It is not that things like lighting and PA systems were completely non-existent; it is that artists and their management had little control over the stage environment. Given this, artists and management maximised the impact of the elements they did control. An engaged, physical performance would (if done right) grab and hold the audience's attention, particularly if that performance contained elements that the audience identified with the specific performer (James Brown's knee drops, and his exaggerated reluctance to leave the stage). Coordinated choreographed movements (The Platters' closely grouped swaying; The Shadows' step routines; the complex dance routines of Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, etc.) created multiple but integrated points of interest, and a repertoire of moves the audience could imitate; appropriate dress codes (Gene Vincent's leather jacket; The Beach Boys' California beachwear; the Beatles' Nehru jackets; The Kinks' hunting outfits) reconfigured the musicians into mobile icons – the costuming itself coming to serve as a signifier of the musician's identity.

In retrospect, the touring conditions described above can be seen as a moment of transition; for a relatively short time, musicians playing newer types of music had to be accommodated into previously existing revue/variety performance structures. However, no sooner had the bands and artists of the early 1960s found their place in the touring ecosystems of the US and the UK, than those ecosystems themselves began to change. The wider transformation of the music industry in the mid and later 1960s has been extensively chronicled.^{[12](#)} A shift in the public's buying habits (in particular, the growth of album sales); the development of new performance spaces (festivals, folk clubs, student unions) and networks; and the changing status of the musician (from primarily an entertainer, delivering music, to in some cases an artist whose work spoke to the times) worked

together to shift the power structures of the industry towards the musician, the musician's management, and towards a new type of promoter. These, in turn, had an impact both on the nature of gigs and on the technologies used to support them.

Bill Graham's early career can serve as an illustrative example of the changes that began to reshape the performance environment from the mid-1960s onwards. Graham moved into concert promotion after a short period as manager of the San Francisco Mime Troupe (a radical mid-1960s theatre company; his first experience of concert promotion was running a benefit gig for one of the Troupe's members who had been arrested on obscenity charges as a result of a performance). He started to stage concerts at the Fillmore Auditorium, an old ballroom in San Francisco in 1965, and then from 1968 until 1971, in two venues – the Fillmore West and the Fillmore East, in San Francisco and New York, respectively. As Waksman notes, venues like the Fillmore fundamentally changed the relationship between the performer and the audience:

Perhaps the biggest shift was the move to make the music, and the artists, more squarely the focus of audience attention, which transformed events that through 1966 and 1967 were still being called “dance concerts” into events at which the audience was expected primarily to watch and listen with attention. As jazz had done with its move into the concert hall starting in the 1930s and 1940s, rock's move into the ballroom had the effect of making it music for listening to the relative exclusion of being music for dancing. Graham himself said of the change, “The music is more important but because it's important, they're not dancing anymore—they're listening. The world has been told that rock is an art form. You don't dance to art. You should, but this one, you don't.”^{[13](#)}

This change is worth noting, both because it demands a different set of behaviours from the audience, and because it creates a different spatial configuration for the event. A dance audience's attention is necessarily dispersed; a concert audience's attention is squarely on the musician (or, at least, it is supposed to be), and therefore, the musician has to justify that attention. The bands playing the Fillmore, and venues like it, were therefore under pressure to create enough visual and aural interest to hold and maintain the audience's interest. In smaller venues, the performer's body might be enough, but the physical impact of their presence might be lost in a larger space. For example, footage of The Doors at the Hollywood Bowl in 1968, and at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970, shows a band struggling to fill a sizeable stage; PA cabinets flank them on either side, but the band itself is confined to a relatively small area in the centre of the space. Jim Morrison, the band's lead singer, at least faces front; Ray Manzarek and Robby Krieger, the keyboard player and guitarist, face each other rather than the crowd. This configuration, which remained more or less fixed through the band's career, might work in the Whisky a Go Go in Los Angeles (which had a capacity of 500). In front of the Bowl audience, or the many thousands who came to the Isle of Wight, it simply would not do. Even the auratic, iconic physical presence of a generational spokesperson such as Morrison (at least, in the cultural discourses of the later 1960s; time has not been kind, either to Morrison or the Doors) simply wouldn't register for the people at the back.

As Graham, and the new generation of promoters who began to operate in the 1960s soon learned, there was therefore a strong practical reason to provide more compelling visual interest. At the same time, one might also say that there were aesthetic and sociological factors that would drive bands, artists, promoters, and record companies (newly dominant in the

1960s and 1970s) to create performances that captured the cultural moment. It is no surprise, for example, that the first dedicated experiments in popular music lighting took place in locations associated with the counterculture, and that they attempted to mimic the experiences of a relatively small, self-selecting clique, who acted as tastemakers for a larger section of the popular music audience. These experiments were associated with a new genre, psychedelia; and they were explicitly related, not simply to the music, but to the set of experiences that LSD (the drug associated with the new genre) unlocked:

The Pink Floyd, once called the underground's house orchestra; on Friday nights, they and other groups play at UFO ... a night-time environment where films, projection and music make the underground's nightclub a huge entertainment scene... One of the aims here is to make music a felt experience, to make the patterns of light and sound merge and fuse deep inside each listener. The attempt has been called psychedelic, or mind expanding...[14](#)

Psychedelia (which was associated with the effects of LSD – a drug that enhanced, blurred, and distorted sensory perception) was a relatively short-lived musical style, and had its moment of greatest cultural influence between 1966 and 1969. However, precisely because it created a profoundly synaesthetic experience, it provided a stimulus to the creation of live environments that could mimic the drug's effects. To create such environments wasn't simply to ally oneself (and by extension, to ally the musicians and the audience) with a particular set of chemical reactions; it was, as Reising and LeBlanc point out, to indicate that you understood that all aspects of experience were fundamentally connected:

Musically, psychedelia generated great interest in matters of the intellect, the spirit, ecstatic merging, hallucinatory clarity and meditative innerness, even the fate of the species. Instead of songs about stolen kisses, surfing great waves and souped-up hot rods, we get songs about death and rebirth, the nature of time and dreamlike visions of mountains disappearing and surreal journeys under the sea.^{[15](#)}

The idea of psychedelia as ‘ecstatic merging’ provided an obvious cue for the technicians and artists who began to develop lighting systems in venues like UFO and the Middle Earth club in London, or the Fillmore. It was not simply that they took the visual distortions induced by the drug as an inspiration. It was that many of the early technicians involved in the development of lighting and sound technologies were themselves committed to the idea of an integrated, synaesthetic practice. Joshua White, the founder of the Joshua Light Show (who worked at the Fillmore), told *Paste* magazine in 2014 that for him a successful night was:

Where we become one with the music. And we’re all feeling the music. I can be as egotistical as I want about the light shows, but if there was no music, there would be no light show. If there was no light show, the music would do just fine. So it’s always about what is leading us, where are we going, and for me a great show is a show where what’s happening with the music syncs with what’s going on in people’s minds and we interpret it.^{[16](#)}

The light shows used equipment that was frequently rudimentary; Zinman’s description of the Joshua Light Show’s set-up gives an accurate idea both of the extent of the technology and of its rather ramshackle assemblage:

The Joshua Light Show employed a veritable arsenal of image-making apparatuses to achieve diverse visual effects: three film projectors, two banks of four-carousel slide projectors, three overhead projectors, hundreds of color wheels, motorized reflectors made of such materials as aluminium foil, Mylar, and broken mirrors, two hair dryers, watercolors, oil colors, alcohol and glycerin, two crystal ashtrays, and dozens of clear glass clock faces.^{[17](#)}

Moreover, such technology was frequently unreliable, and sometimes, as Nick Mason of Pink Floyd remembered, it was simply unsafe:

One of [Peter Wynne Wilson, the band's lighting man's] ... creations used a movie light, pushed beyond the recommended limits to achieve maximum brightness. In front of this was mounted a coloured glass wheel spun at extremely high speed... With two wheels the possibilities were not just doubled but squared. By adjusting the speed of both wheels colours were produced that could only be sensed... But the uneven temperatures, the shaking and banging, and the wildly spinning colour wheels, meant the glass had an alarming tendency to run out of control and shatter noisily, sending vicious shards of glass flying into the band at very close quarters.^{[18](#)}

But even allowing for the unreliability of the systems, assembled as they were at some speed and considerable ingenuity from whatever the technicians could press into service, the effects the system operators managed to achieve were frequently very impressive. For example, one of the most common techniques was to create fluid, multicoloured light by manipulating liquids. Lighting crews used variously mixed preparations of oil, glycerine, and dyed water to give them some control over the flow and

the colour of the image. The liquid was pressed together between two sheets of glass, and by sliding the sheets over each other different shapes and mixtures could be created. These were projected on to a backcloth, but frequently the new generation of lighting designers found that there was no way to prevent the display from bleeding over the stage, and therefore, over the musicians themselves. However, this was not necessarily a drawback, given that the impetus behind lightshows like White's was not to establish a distance between the artist and the audience, but to blur the boundaries between them. This was an ethos that was shared by some of the key bands of the time. Bill Ham, a key figure in the evolution of psychedelic light shows, told *Collector's Weekly* in 2016 that:

During one my weekends at the Avalon, we had hung white plastic on the walls behind the band so we'd have something to project onto. At some point I took a break, and when I came back, the Grateful Dead's roadies had moved all of their equipment onto the stage, completely blocking our white background. Well, I went over to Owsley Stanley, who was the band's sound guy, plus a few other things, and explained what we were trying to do. He heard me out and said that he couldn't do anything about it tonight, but he'd have the crew paint all the speakers white for the next day. And they did.^{[19](#)}

In retrospect, London and California might be the most significant locations in the development of concert lighting; however, they weren't the only ones. In New York, the collective of artists and musicians grouped around Andy Warhol's factory mounted a series of events, given the collective, and distinctively Warholian, title *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable*. These shows, staged first of all at the Dom in New York in 1966, featured equipment that would not have been out of place at the Fillmore; at its

height, the *EPI* used up to five film projectors, strobe lighting, movable spotlights fitted with coloured gels, slide projectors, and performers enacting scenarios from the songs of the Velvet Underground, the *EPI*'s house band. As in California and London, lighting didn't mark the performers out as separate from the audience. Film footage was projected over the musicians, and the strobes and spots played indiscriminately over the stage and auditorium.²⁰ The cumulative effect of the technology was, however, rather different. At the Fillmore and the other venues on the West coast, stage technicians aimed to create a synaesthetic connection between the performers and the audience. Warhol's multimedia performances relied on disjunction (the harsh, jarring music of the Velvets, the disorienting lighting) and on the absence of affect (the uninflected vocal delivery of Reed and Nico, the emotionally blank images – largely drawn from Warhol's own film work – projected over the performance space). The Fillmore technologies aimed at the performance of connection, the *EPI* at the performance of alienation; unsurprisingly, when the two operations encountered each other (as they did when the *EPI* took their show to Bill Graham's Fillmore from the 27th to the 29th May 1966), they found they had little in common. Ben Van Meter, who was hired by Graham to film the *EPI* at the Fillmore, later recalled:

That was the early Fillmore when Graham put up the screens for Andy's films. While they were in town, somebody invited me, Bob Nelson, and I think Wes Wilson, to interview with one of the newspapers or radio stations with Andy and his crew. It was pretty funny. I mean, the West Coast people were all talking about psychedelics, expanded consciousness, and natural foods, and the East Coast people were talking about heroin.²¹

It could be said, though, that in effect both the EPI and the various lightshows on the West Coast were, despite their aesthetic and philosophical differences, attempting the same thing. Both intended to bridge the gap between the stage and the audience; both used projected media (light shows, film, and image projection) that were, at the beginning, taken from a variety of sources and pressed into service in new venues in the UK and the US; and both aimed to create an emotionally charged, immersive experience, one that completely enveloped the audience throughout the show. For all the tension between Warhol's and Graham's teams, Graham at least recognised some similarities between their approaches to lighting and design, and was keen to turn the crossover to his advantage. The *EPI*'s lighting engineer was Danny Williams; impressed by his work in setting up the lights for the Fillmore shows, Graham co-opted Williams for the Fillmore.^{[22](#)}

The various lightshows aimed to reconfigure venues that were not originally intended for popular music performance (footage of the UFO club, for example, shows both the extent and operation of the projections, and the unsuitability of the room, which was low ceilinged, bare, with awkwardly placed glass doors). Lighting could partly obscure the fact that these were, essentially, found and repurposed venues – clubs that housed other events on other evenings, music halls, ballrooms, and cinemas that had been designed for different types of performance. And for these venues, and more crucially for the larger spaces that bands and musicians found themselves using, amplification could not only bridge the gap between performer and audience but could itself be used as a key part of the shifting relation between the stage and the auditorium.

Two of the decade's iconic performances give a very clear indication of the importance of developing appropriate sound technologies. The Beatles

played Shea Stadium, in front of an audience of 55,000, on 15 August 1965. The set was characteristically short – just over half an hour – and was largely inaudible. The band had tried to prepare themselves for the size of the space. They came armed with bespoke amplifiers, made by Vox, that were capable of generating 100 watts worth of sound, rather than the 30 watts they usually employed. However, the amplification had to counter the noise generated by an extremely excitable crowd, and it also had to bridge a considerable physical gap. The Beatles occupied a stage in the middle of the playing field, and the audience were seated on the stands. No wonder the new amps, and the stadium's own PA system, proved inadequate – they were both nowhere near powerful enough to overcome the noise of the crowd, or to shrink the physical distance between the musicians and the audience. Before the performance, John Lennon (who by this stage well understood how difficult the gig would be) commented sardonically, 'I think it makes us less nervous playing to a big crowd than a little crowd, because if you're playing to a little crowd they're gonna hear what you're playing.'²³ During the performance, he attempted to announce 'A Hard Day's Night,' but the screaming audience overwhelmed the PA system. Lennon broke into cod-Japanese, waving his arms, until George Harrison (who was responsible for the hiatus) was ready, but the audience barely reacted.

Ten months later, Bob Dylan and the Band played the Free Trade Hall in Manchester. Famously, during the course of the gig, Dylan heard and responded to a fan shouting 'Judas,' with a tired 'I don't believe you ... You're a liar,' and with the shouted instruction to his backing band, 'Play it fucking loud.' This moment has been frequently discussed; a book, by the music journalist C.P. Lee, has been devoted to the gig (amusingly, Lee found three people who claimed to have been the one who shouted).²⁴ The

moment is certainly culturally significant. I have argued elsewhere that one of the things it marks is the decisive entry into popular music performance of a discourse grounded in the perceived authenticity of the musician as artist.²⁵ However, the moment reveals something that was, in retrospect, arguably as historically significant as Dylan's relation to his audience. Richard Alderson, who had worked with Dylan in the Greenwich village clubs where the singer learned his craft, built a sound system for the 1965–1966 tour which included large PA speakers and rudimentary monitors on either side of the stage, angled upwards. During the second half of the shows, the amount of amplification available to the band was substantial enough to drown out even the most vociferous responses – especially as the band responded to audience catcalls by playing more aggressively.²⁶ Dylan's tour might have been a trial for the artist, and for some of Dylan's fans, but it also marked a shift in the relation between musician and audience. Sonically, it was a clear demonstration that new technologies enabled artists to dominate the space; and, more than that, it allowed the artists to create a sonic environment in which the audience were immersed.

This kind of amplification was not available to everyone, nor was it yet adequate for larger venues. But a trend had been set; by the end of the decade, most of the key features of concert PA systems, and vocal and instrumental amplification, were in place. Companies such as WEM (Watkins Electronic Music) developed PA systems that could increase the volume available to artists onstage. WEM were responsible for the first 'slave' PA system (one where amplifiers were linked to each other, so that the input of one boosted the output of another). The system was used at the Windsor Jazz and Blues Festival in 1967. The bill featured Cream, Fleetwood Mac, Jeff Beck, Ten Years After, and The Nice – bands who would, over the next few years, find themselves playing larger and larger

venues, and requiring more and more volume. WEM's PA was not, it is fair to say, an unqualified success. The system ran into technical problems, delaying the running of the festival, and the company found itself in court, accused of a breach of the peace (the case was dismissed). But a PA capable of generating 1,000 watts, as opposed to the 100-watt amps the Beatles had at Shea Stadium, was a substantial advance. WEM also developed a mixing desk that allowed onstage sound levels to be blended together in real time; Bill Hanley and John Chester, working at Bill Graham's Fillmore East in New York, created cabling that enabled them to move the mixing desk offstage, so that the sound engineer (a role that, previously, had not existed) could hear the music as the audience heard it. Flexible amplification, that could be adjusted during the performance, allowed bands like Cream and The Who to flood venues with music that was, by previous standards, extremely loud – but it also allowed greater precision, so that volumes could be manipulated without losing the clarity of the signal. For the more adventurous bands, these innovations offered the chance to immerse the audience in a shifting sonic environment. Pink Floyd, for example, employed a rudimentary panning device linked to a quadraphonic sound system, named the 'Azimuth Co-ordinator,' which was operated by band's keyboard player, Richard Wright. At venues that could accommodate the speaker arrangement the device required, Wright could pan sound effects (echoing footsteps were, by all accounts, particularly effective) from one side of the space to the other.

Better PA systems shifted the sonic balance of the event decisively in the musicians' favour, and the musicians themselves were able to employ, and to theatricalise, the technological possibilities opened up by the new generation of instruments they used to create the music. Waksman has pointed out that, from the earliest examples of rock and roll, musicians

learned how to adapt and exploit sonic elements that, in many cases, they discovered by accident:

[Guitarists] such as Kizart and Burlison, Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry, Scotty Moore and Carl Perkins were all part of a broader wave of sonic exploration and experimentation that began during the late 1940s and extended into the 1950s, and that centered around the electric guitar. This was more than a matter of fusing (black) blues and (white) country musical styles, as the development of rock and roll has so often been explained. The distorted tones issuing from the era's electric guitars were indicative of a deeper shift in the cultural disposition toward sound, a shift that was built around the musical incorporation of tones and timbres that had previously been classified as little more than noise.²⁷

Musicians in the 1960s were able, therefore, to draw on at least two decades of experimentation, and they were also able to work with better, more flexible, more powerful and (crucially) more reliable amplifiers, and with a new generation of effects pedals²⁸ which, because they used transistors, were lighter and more portable. Effects and amplification enabled popular musicians in the 1960s to differentiate themselves sharply from other musical styles; Keith Richards' fuzztone on '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction,' Hendrix's adoption of the wah pedal, Jeff Beck's early experiments with feedback, and The Who's with Gustav Metzger's auto-destructive art established a clear set of links between technology, youth culture, innovation, and (in The Who's and Hendrix's cases) between musical performance and risk-taking theatricality. A Fender Stratocaster and a Marshall or Hiwatt amp and cabinet were expensive and solidly built; smashing them at the gig's end (as Townsend did regularly, even if the

guitars he smashed were reconstituted from the remains of previously trashed instruments) created an instantly iconic demonstration of youthful frustration, and the underground's disdain for materialism, but it also required a great deal of effort, which in itself could be theatricalised – and it also created a mutating, assaultive noise, because the pickups on the guitar, and the feedback loop created by the interaction of the pickups and the speakers, could be relied upon unpredictably to soundtrack Townsend's performances.

By the end of the 1960s, the central elements that would, over the next decade, combine to create the theatricalised environments occupied by contemporary musicians had begun to come together. This wasn't in response to a particular, overriding aesthetic imperative, or on the terms set by a particular cultural movement. Rather, the main impetus was economic; bands and artists, newly declared representatives of a burgeoning youth culture (rather than as entertainers whose popularity would fade as interest in popular music faded), played larger spaces for longer. These larger spaces, necessarily, had to be filled both sonically and visually, and the elements chosen to enhance these performances were drawn from previous technologies – house PA systems, the lighting technologies that had evolved for different types of performance – and from those technologies that emerged, at speed, piecemeal, and through trial and error, in an attempt to craft a suitable visual and aural setting for the musician. As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, the technical resources needed to create the kind of theatricalised environments discussed in the previous chapter were all in place, even if in embryonic form. As noted above, in the 1950s and early 1960s, the performer's physical dynamism had previously had to compensate for the constraints of the space and the technology. Now, in some spaces, the performer could be framed – not just by the spotlights,

floods, and gels available in the various spaces in which artists performed, but by bespoke environments created specifically to support the kind of music that they were playing. These environments were, even at the end of the decade, relatively few in number; when bands like Pink Floyd played outside of London, they could, depending on the venue, encounter a fair amount of audience hostility. However, the practices and the mindset evolved in venues such as the Fillmore (and then the Fillmore East and West), the UFO club, and the EPI proved very influential, and the personnel who organised the lightshows and the sound would move from venues to touring networks and to the musicians themselves. In the early years of the next decade, artists developed performance techniques that allowed them to function in a new scenographic environment, one in which the audience's attention could be held and focussed in a way that was simply not open to previous artists.

The turn to theatre: The 1970s

In 1973, Alice Cooper embarked on a tour that was elaborate even by the band's previous standards. Over the previous two years, the band had made a name for themselves through performances that blended elements of early Heavy Metal, Glam, and *Grand Guignol*; the band's singer, who had also taken the name Alice Cooper, used rapiers, axes, and boa constrictors as onstage props, dismembered infant dolls (in a welter of stage blood), took part in a realistic (and, for the band, dangerous) onstage fight with his fellow musicians, and was dragged to a fake gallows and hanged every night. He did so, moreover, while dressed in as androgynous and abject a fashion as the early 1970s allowed – in leotards and torn fishnets, his long black hair straggling, his face made up, with deep, black ovals around the eyes. The performances were controversial; in 1972, for example, the

Labour MP Leo Abse attempted to ban any future live shows in the UK, but the media furore helped to boost the band's appeal. By 1973, the band's popularity was peaking, and their record company and management decided to support the release of that year's album, *Billion Dollar Babies*, with a large-scale US tour featuring a set more elaborate than anything the band had previously used:

Built on multiple levels, the stage comprises two steel cages flanking a Busby Berkley-inspired staircase that, per Alice's request, lights up with each step he takes. Silvered bodies hang from the superstructure, and a gilded Egyptian sarcophagus with lasers that shoot from its eyes looms behind centre stage. 'The drums were right in the middle of the stage', says [Neal] Smith. 'To my right and left were these big towers that probably went twenty feet into the air. There's four braces to the towers covered in tiny lights all the way up and down, and a huge mirror ball that hung from them. My drums were covered with half-inch mirrors, so when the Super Troupers hit them they just exploded like a billion diamonds. It was all lit up and moving, like nothing anybody had ever seen before.'²⁹

The set was heavy and difficult to manage; it was also dangerous – Michael Bruce, the band's guitarist, repeatedly cut himself on a metal beam during shows. By current standards, it might also seem rather small-scale. However, at the time, Cooper's 1973 tour was treated as something both qualitatively different from, and in opposition to, the ethos of authenticity in popular music. Even a sympathetic critic such as Charles Shaar Murray, reviewing the band's Madison Square Garden gig on 30 June 1973, felt that he had to deal with the troubling implications of such an overtly theatrical staging:

If you want to enter totally into the spirit of the thing, then that's real blood on the guillotine blade, and Alice is indeed truly reincarnated at the end of the show like some nightmarish bastard son of Jesus Christ and Mr. Punch. You pays yer money and yer takes yer proverbial choice. The catch is that you've already paid yer money.

But to imply that Alice is a rip-off artist would be completely invalid. Agreed, he's taking us all for a ride, but it's a good one, and the best con-man of all is one who pulls off his caper and still leaves his mark thinking he's had a good deal.

Alice Cooper is into doing anything that his audience will pay to see, which is cool, because so are many other rock acts. The difference is that they don't admit it.

Let's attempt to analyse whatever it is that Alice Cooper is selling. He must be selling something, because people, obviously enough, are buying.^{[30](#)}

Part of the reason that Alice Cooper and other bands and artists who embraced the theatrical possibilities of the gig were so troubling for journalists like Murray was that, as this review suggests, they pointed up an uncomfortable truth about popular music performance. As noted above, one of the ideas bequeathed to future generations of musicians, audiences, and critics by the shifting status of popular music in the mid to late 1960s was that it was possible for musicians to aspire to the status of artists. Albums, in particular, were treated as in some cases profound artistic statements (The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* (1966)), explorations of the further reaches of human experience (The Grateful Dead's *Aoxomoxoa* (1969), Jefferson Airplane's *After Bathing at Baxter's* (1967)); excavations of the artist's life (Joni Mitchell's *Blue* (1971), Carole King's *Tapestry* (1971), Neil Young's

Harvest (1972)); reports from the cultural front line (the Stones' work from *Beggar's Banquet* (1968) to *Exile on Main St.* (1972), Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1971), Sly and the Family Stone's *There's a Riot Goin' On* (1971)), or, in some cases, as a combination of all four (Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* (1968)). Such cultural products were sharply differentiated in the emerging, newly important music press from the kind of commercial music that appealed to those whose musical palates were (by implication) less discerning. One of the most successful pieces of popular music in both the UK and the US in 1969, for example, was 'Sugar Sugar,' by The Archies – but a piece of very well-crafted bubblegum pop, attributed to a fictional cartoon band derived from the Archie comics, did not carry the same cultural cachet as, for example, Van Morrison's initially unsuccessful album *Astral Weeks*, released the year before. 'Sugar Sugar' has largely been forgotten. *Astral Weeks* has been recuperated into the pantheon of popular music as artistic statement, because it carried all the signifiers of art – the singer struggling against the music industry, music produced with scant regard for conventional structure, lyrics that actively invited decoding, and so on. The problem with Alice Cooper's performances was that, although the band produced music that in some ways suggested an allegiance with one of the strands of popular music as art (there is a vein of overt social commentary that runs through the band's early 1970s albums), it was easy for critics to read their performances as little more than pandering to an unreflecting, sensation-seeking audience. Running through Murray's largely positive review is the idea that his enjoyment of the gig is something of a guilty pleasure, that as a professional rock journalist, the best he can say is that Alice Cooper are at least honest. They make apparent the commercial underpinnings of the business, rather than trying to hide them; but even then, it was not enough for their work to

be recuperated as an authentic example of popular music as art. They were, in the discourses of the time, simply too theatrical.

Alice Cooper's theatricality did have precedents. The band's early albums were released on the Straight label, which was owned and run by Frank Zappa, who had begun to explore the idea of music performance as theatre some years before. When Zappa's then band, the Mothers of Invention, played the Festival Hall in London on 25 October 1968, he roped the members of the BBC symphony orchestra into performing in a short play, which dramatised the struggle between members of the Mothers (described in the play as the talented members of a 'rocking teenage combo') and Don Preston, the band's keyboard player, who wanted the Mothers to embrace macrobiotic food and avant-garde music:

The subsequent mayhem included the BBC symphony orchestra members joining the 'talented' boys' 'band with a lot of discipline'; Jimmy Carl Black [one of the group's two drummers] donning Hendrix fright-wig and Regency jacket to score some 'pussy' in the audience; and Roy Estrada, as the Mexican Pope, in chain-mail, metal tits [sic] and bishop's mitre, distributing 'birth pills' from a bucket.³¹

Zappa's theatricalisation of the performance event was clearly satirical (even though, from a more recent perspective, it equally clearly demonstrates the queasy interaction between late 1960s sexual liberation and late 1960s misogyny). It was based on the realisation, which Zappa mined as a source of musical and performative material through to the end of his career, that the musician onstage was, by definition, performing themselves rather than simply playing music – and that this performance also included everyone involved in the event. Zappa presented this insight ironically, describing moments of audience interaction as 'enforced

recreation,'³² and memorably snapping back at an anti-militaristic German heckler, 'Everybody in this room is wearing a uniform, and don't kid yourself.'³³

Zappa, however, always maintained his distance both from the performances and from the audience. Cooper, gleefully, seemed to want to efface that distance, and to unite band and audience in celebration of acts designed, as Simon Reynolds put it, to *épater les bourgeois*³⁴ through the conscious manipulation of shocking tropes and behaviours, on record, in performance, and in other public events. As Chambers argued, this meant that Alice Cooper the band (and especially Alice Cooper the frontman) had to engage in a continuous performance, one that moved from the concert hall out into the media and from there out into the wider world:

The concert stage included imagery of violence, death, and sexual aggression. The media stage promoted themes of death (or communication with the dead) and sexual license. If we are to interpret the sign-vehicles offered by Concert Alice through those given by Media Alice, we might conclude that the nightmarish imagery in the stage show does indeed serve to promote gluttony, sexual license, and witchcraft. However, the notion that the "only message is here I am and what are you going to do about me," if taken at face value, suggests that these sign-vehicles were themselves chosen not for the specific information with which they were associated, but simply because that information itself was shocking.³⁵

And in emphasising theatricality in performance (and also by eliding the difference between the performer and his or her performance persona), Cooper was not alone. The first years of the 1970s, in popular music performance, could be described as a general turn towards the theatrical; in

other words, towards the creation of bespoke staging environments that moved with the musician from venue to venue. This turn had been prepared for, through the technological and scenographic developments of the mid to late 1960s, but given the changing conditions of the 1970s (the growth of the music industry as a whole; the formation of new genres; the development of touring networks and venues; and so on) theatrical modes of presentation were always likely to be foregrounded, if only because employing them meant both that bands and artists could shape an immediately recognisable visual template for themselves.

The move towards overtly theatrical performance environments occurred across a range of styles simultaneously. To take three examples: Funk artists, in the genre's early days, adopted striking costumes, and a performance style that mirrored the audience's response to the music:

In her research on street funk in Dayton, Ohio, Portia Maulsby demonstrates that dance was a crucial aspect of funk musicianship. In her interview with bassist Marshall Jones of the Ohio Players, Jones suggests that he “read” black dances as (choreo)graphs. He says, “I’d always find somebody on the dance floor and I would watch how they moved. I would watch them flowing with the hips and then move. And I would get in sync with that pattern.” Jones’s statement that he got “in sync” with the dancers’ movements epitomizes actionality as a form of cognition.^{[36](#)}

Funk musicians, in embodying the music, also, as this quote suggests, embodied the audience's response, at the same time as their chosen costuming marked them out as unignorable to the rest of the US. Partly, costuming marked bands like Funkadelic off from previous generations of Black American musicians. The well-tailored, neatly

choreographed performance style more commonly associated with Motown was replaced by something looser, more striking, and, as George Clinton told *Disc and Echo* magazine in 1971, less ignorable:

“We were down in Tunbridge Wells,” he was saying (by the way, George is the one with the patch-work shaved head), “and just walking down the streets people were stopping and staring. They were even coming out of shop doorways to take a look. It was like the circus had come to town and the circus was us!”^{[37](#)}

Over the course of the 1970s funk musicians developed a performance rhetoric that merged Afrofuturism, spiritualism, political engagement, and solidarity, and from the outset the genre in performance (tied as it was to a newly assertive Black American politics) was characterised by the unignorable visual impact of the costumes and performances and the loosely choreographed echoing of audience behaviours by the musicians. It would be wrong, though, to assume that genres like Funk embraced theatrical modes of performance purely because of the shifting relation of Black American musicians to their audience. In 1973, Clinton was asked if the band’s developing stage act bore any comparison to that of Alice Cooper. Rather than denying the parallels, he answered:

As a matter of fact, about two or three years ago, we were rapping on the type of show that they were doing and that we were doing. We were both just getting off into it and they were with Frank Zappa at the time. We were talking about the different things that they wanted to do and the things we wanted to do, and it’s working out pretty well for both of us.^{[38](#)}

In other words, Clinton was alive to the fact that theatricalising performances simultaneously achieved two goals. It allowed him and the band to present a defiantly assertive counterpoint to the subordinate status of Black Americans, and it allowed a direct connection to the audience – an invitation not just to party, but to enjoy the unfolding spectacle, in a way that was directly comparable to the experiences that audiences for other musicians were coming to expect.

Funk performance, as Clinton pointed out, evolved in tandem and dialogue with other contemporaneous genre developments; Glam, a genre that developed in the early 1970s, had an equally complex relation to the musical styles that preceded and surrounded it. From psychedelia it drew an interest in otherworldliness, and in performance styles that marked the performer out as being the representative of a new or different reality, but Glam performers otherwise tended to divide themselves sharply from the counterculture (a division iconically celebrated in Mott the Hoople's 'All the Young Dudes,' which was written by David Bowie, who had himself embraced, and then rejected, the 1960s underground). Glam, as Auslander has persuasively argued, didn't have a defining musical signature;³⁹ what gave the genre its coherence was the visual impact of the individual artists:

That the music classified as glam rock ranges from the buoyant boogie of T.Rex, to the sophisticated, self-conscious deployment of rock and pop styles by David Bowie and Roxy Music, to the straightforward hard rock of Kiss, to the simplistic, minimalist pop of Gary Glitter indicates that this rock subgenre cannot be defined purely in terms of musical style... Even more than most rock subgenres, glam rock was defined primarily by the performers' appearances and personae, the poses they struck rather than the music they played.⁴⁰

Key Glam performers created a set of easily recognisable, visually striking identities (Marc Bolan's glitter make-up, David Bowie's androgynous, cod-Japanese costuming, Roxy Music's retrofuturism, Suzy Quatro's biker gear, and Slade, whose costumes were a mixture of Teddy Boy and Skinhead fashion, retrofuturism, and DIY glitz). In a manner that was strikingly similar to Funk (although musically the two had little in common), Glam turned musicians operating within the genre into iconic representations of alien otherness, social and sexual transgression, and defiantly tacky bad taste. As with Funk in the US, this chimed with the shifting social landscape of the UK in the 1970s. As Stratton has argued, Glam was more than a simple response to the implied dowdiness of hippiedom; it was a response to what felt, in the UK at least, like a newly exciting, colourful, and unmissably commercialised world – Guy Debord's society of the spectacle writ large:

Glam was not limited to popular music because the developments that gave rise to Glam Rock influenced all areas of commodification that were part of the productive circuit that included colour television. It is not that moderation had ceased to exist, this is hyperbolic. Rather, moderation was the foundation of the real world which was being overtaken by the society of the spectacle. Excess is what makes the image that constructs the spectacle desirable. Excess is the basis of that desire. The desire that makes the viewer (voyeur?) want to go through the screen.^{[41](#)}

Glam musicians had, therefore, good reason to engage in theatricalised performances. Glam was itself already a performance – a mixture of pre-existing and emerging musical styles that came with their own, established performative codes. Live shows were similarly an exercise in selective

quoting, either as part of an ongoing, self-conscious artistic process (Bowie's shifting personae, Roxy Music's musical and cultural bricolages) or as a sign to the audience that both musicians and audiences were gleefully involved in a culture of excess (as was the case for Slade, The Sweet, and Gary Glitter).

Although Glam was culturally very influential, it could be argued that another genre proved over time to be more important in terms of the development of popular music staging. Progressive rock, a musical style which seemed (and was thought of by its fans⁴²) as diametrically opposed to Glam, contained live performances that were as theatrical, and, in many cases, far more elaborate, than anything achieved by Bowie, Slade, or Roxy Music. Progressive groups began to develop elaborate staging techniques for a variety of reasons. Some predated the development of the genre; some of the key performers in the first wave of progressive rock bands had already evolved their performance styles well before the genre developed. Ian Anderson, Jethro Tull's frontman, carried the tramp persona he had originated in the band's early days as a blues band into Tull's progressive rock period. His habitual pose – flute raised, left leg cocked, left foot on right knee – and his costuming (a long, dirty greatcoat) were as iconic a representation of the artist and the band as Bowie's make-up and kimono.⁴³ Keith Emerson, of Emerson, Lake & Palmer, employed the same overtly theatrical playing style in his previous band, The Nice; Emerson, the band's keyboard player, was already known for, amongst other things, rocking a Hammond Organ back and forward (to trigger the instrument's reverb spring), vaulting over the instrument, and jamming knives into the keyboard to sustain notes. The expanded compositions (and the level of commercial visibility) of Progressive Rock gave performers like Emerson and Anderson room to explore and develop performance styles that were already formed.

However, in the genre as a whole, dynamic performers were relatively rare. The form's musical complexity meant that, in many instances, musicians were comparatively immobile. The guitarists Robert Fripp (of King Crimson) and Steve Hackett (of Genesis) sat down during performances, and those guitarists who stood (Steve Howe and Chris Squire of Yes) simply could not engage in the kind of dynamic performances audiences would expect from Bowie or Slade. It is not that they were entirely immobile (contemporary footage shows both Howe and Squire fully engaged with the tracks they're playing). Rather, it was that the music the bands played could be very technically complex and might require a great deal of concentration. Scenography could therefore generate visual and performative interest, taking some of the performative burden away from the individual musician.

But there was another reason why an overtly theatrical mode of presentation fitted progressive rock, one which has proved lastingly influential (and which has been adopted and adapted by musicians in other genres, to such an extent that it might be termed an industry standard). Progressive rock's impact was in some ways as directly visual as that of Glam, but the visual aspect suggested something different – not an excessive, maximal version of late 20th century reality, but a self-contained world accessible to those who were willing to decode the clues given to them on album covers and other bits of ancillary design (posters, concert programmes, and so on). As [Anderton \(2024\)](#) has pointed out, such material formed part of progressive rock's various idiolects.⁴⁴ Sometimes this material was fantastical (Roger Dean's designs for Yes); sometimes it required active analysis (each element of the sleeve design for Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* signifies absence, but this reading is, to say the least, not immediately apparent to the casual consumer). Sometimes the music

was presented as one element in an entirely self-contained artefact. Those who bought Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick* when it first came out found that the record cover was a mock local newspaper (*The St. Cleve Chronicle*). The paper's lead story concerned a local prodigy – a young boy whose controversial poem was disqualified by the judges of a major literary prize. The name of the poem (which was printed in the newspaper) was, of course, *Thick as a Brick*. As Hegarty and Halliwell have argued (in a discussion of progressive concept albums), Progressive Rock aimed at immersion, and album design and imagery was a key part of that impact:

The gatefold sleeve signals the immersive intent of an album. Literally, the listener becomes a reader of images, particularly when the cover picture spreads over two, or even four, 12-inch surfaces. As the concept album exceeds the world of the rock album, so it becomes a contained whole in which the listener is a willing captive. Many listeners switch off and do not read lyrics or look at the colour art while listening, but the purpose of the artwork is to involve the listener in a separate, self-contained world signalled in the act of opening up the internal surfaces of the double cover. The extravagant artwork invites in the listener/reader even before the listening act, and has the potential to keep playing once the record has been re-sleeved.⁴⁵

As Edward Macan has argued,⁴⁶ the idea of a complete, separate visual identity was something that soon became a key feature of the genre as a whole. To an extent, this was also true of Glam; but Glam foregrounded the image of the artist (Bowie was the cover star on each one of his 1970s albums, his costuming and make-up giving clues to the nature of the music inside). In Progressive Rock the image itself predominated. King Crimson, one of the first successful progressive bands, didn't appear on an album

cover until *Red* in 1974; as saleable images, their faces weren't nearly as instantly identifiable as the painting of a screaming face on the front cover of their debut album, *In the Court of the Crimson King* (1969).

As the more successful progressive bands moved into larger venues and went out on headline tours (themselves a new phenomenon; by the early 1970s, the music industry was sufficiently confident of the appeal of successful acts that it would support what were frequently loss-making strings of live performances in order to promote album releases), they faced the same problems as their generation of musicians: how to fill the space, and how to hold the attention of the audience. They could not rely on dynamic physical performance, and their appeal to a live audience was predicated on their ability to recreate complex pieces of music. However, they had an advantage. The genre was associated with a set of iconic visual images that could either be adopted wholesale or could be used as the basis for the design of the stage. Yes, for example, drew on the services of Roger Dean, the man who drew their album covers, to create the stage set they used in 1973 to tour the double concept album *Tales from Topographic Oceans*; the fibreglass structures were designed both to catch and filter the stage lighting, and mimicked the bizarre geology on the album cover. Genesis' lead singer, Peter Gabriel, donned costumes that linked, either directly or by association, both with the world of the band's music and with the general aesthetic of their album covers (in particular the fantastical Englishness of Paul Whitehead's covers for *Nursery Cryme* and *Foxtrot*). Jethro Tull, who were (as noted above) a rather more mobile group of musicians, broke up the performances of their long concept albums with comedy routines and multimedia inserts ('The Hare Who Lost His Spectacles,' an interpolated story on the album *Passion Play*, was presented in concert as a film). Pink Floyd's lighting became more elaborate, and

from 1973 onwards the band used a large circular screen, on which was projected films that illustrated the themes of the tracks. Emerson, Lake & Palmer (who, as already noted, already had a dynamic central performer) embellished their 1973 shows with revolving drum risers, exploding technology, and a grand piano spinning in mid-air while Emerson, tethered to the piano stool, mimed a complex musical passage.⁴⁷

Progressive Rock, as a genre, quickly accrued a reputation as overly complex and pretentious.⁴⁸ However, of all the genres that developed in the early 1970s, it has arguably had the greatest influence on the contemporary staging of popular music. As noted above, progressive musicians needed technology; long, complex pieces of music required more visual effects – otherwise, the audience in concert halls and arenas would have little to hold their attention. The stage had therefore to be visually interesting, and it also had to reflect the ethos of the music, in a way that chimed with the audience's perception of the world the music created (what Anderton would term their perception of the genre's idiolect). This idiolect, in turn, had been set by the iconography that surrounded the musicians. In live performance, Yes could move towards the kind of landscapes fans associated with their album artwork; the films that accompanied Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* tour were directed by Storm Thorgerson, who also ran the company who designed the group's album covers. Other artists (David Bowie being a key, and extremely influential example) sought to create an onstage aesthetic that extended the imagery already associated with the artist to the design and lighting of the stage: but progressive rock was the first genre whose successful exponents did so as a matter both of course and of necessity.

Progressive Rock gigs set a template for other, successful touring musicians and groups; they also helped to convert what was, in the late

1960s, an adjunct to the running of particular venues such as the Fillmore into an industry in its own right. Touring bands required bespoke lighting and sound facilities; this meant that personnel had to be assigned to new roles in the design and operation of lighting rigs and PA systems. The instruments musicians used, and the effects those instruments required, had to be maintained during what could be very long, very arduous tours, so people needed to be on hand to set up and repair the guitars, basses, drums, and keyboards the musicians needed. Road crews had to be skilled in rigging and striking sets, and someone had to work out the logistics involved in moving sets from place to place. On the back cover of Pink Floyd's double album *Ummagumma*, released in 1969, the band's equipment is proudly displayed, and by the standards of the time it is rather impressive: a full, personalised drumkit, tympani, glockenspiel, two guitars, two basses, an organ, and an array of amps, cabinets, and PA speakers. The band's Bedford van is parked at the back of the picture, and all of the equipment we can see could be fitted inside. Five years later, Emerson, Lake & Palmer toured the US:

Now and again the organisation around Emerson Lake and Palmer gives the impression of a huge business combine rather than a bunch of people working for a rock band.

In fact ICI and ELP are probably run on similar lines – with a defined hierarchical order, a mania for cost-consciousness and strict controls among their employees. However, since the band take out probably the most gargantuan road show yet devised by man, it seems the only possible way to keep them on the road.

The three concerts ELP played at Wembley last weekend altogether involved 65 people and nearly 40 tons of equipment, carried around in three TIR articulated trucks. Carl Palmer's hand-made, custom-built,

revolving drum set-up complete with drum synthesisers alone weighs two and half tons. And Emerson uses a total of ten keyboards.

Over the weekend they played to 36,000 people, but the costs were so high it looks like they'll make a financial loss. When the whole outfit arrived in Britain from the States it took them seven days to pass through customs.⁴⁹

To this one might add other, equally complex examples of early and mid-1970s staging. The ruined cityscape used by David Bowie on the *Diamond Dogs* tour in 1974, which featured (amongst other things) a moveable bridge section, a skyscraper made of newsprint that Bowie demolished during each gig, and a cherry picker that carried him above the front rows during 'Space Oddity.'⁵⁰ On tour in 1974 and 1975, Genesis performed (and their lead singer, Peter Gabriel, acted out) the central narrative of their double concept album, *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*. This required integrated back projection (the show used 1,450 slides), a laser light show, and some very specific costuming (at one point Gabriel dressed as a Slipperman – a grotesquely lumpen creature, with inflatable genitalia, who crawled on to the stage through a penis-shaped tube). Even groups who did not adopt such overtly dramatic modes of presentation found themselves reliant on more complex technologies. The Who, touring the double album *Quadrophenia*, used backing tapes to augment the performance (even though the tapes proved very unreliable); and Led Zeppelin, playing Earls Court in 1975, used a live feed that projected images of the band members on a large screen (and we can note in passing that the touring stage that Zeppelin used at this point in their career itself weighed 40 tons).

As Waksman has noted, this trend towards larger, more elaborate styles of staging, designed to be portable and to fill larger spaces, necessarily meant that the process of touring had to become industrialised. This was

most clearly apparent in the evolution of the industry in the US, which was both a very large and a very profitable market, and the place to which other musical cultures looked for the final stamp of success. For a generation of UK bands, for example, a lot of time and trouble was spent in trying to break into the US market – sometimes successfully (Zeppelin, Bowie, the Bay City Rollers, etc.) and sometimes unsuccessfully (Slade, who never managed to repeat their striking UK successes in America). This trend affected both the live industry as a whole, as national and regional concert organisations gradually replaced individual promoters in separate locations, and in the fine details of performance (as, for example, lighting and sound crews learned on the road about the vagaries of particular venues). The UK, a significant source of new artists and styles in the late 1960s and early 1970s, experienced a version of the same evolution, but constrained by the size of the territory and the size of the venues. National exposure was easier to achieve, but the market wasn't as big, and the venues open even to the largest bands weren't as large or as flexible as the burgeoning arena circuit in the States. The touring industries in both countries had therefore to accommodate to different types and scales of venues, and this had an effect on the nature and extent of the touring networks in both countries, as the crews, technicians, and designers responsible for stage sets learned to fit the spaces available to them. A UK venue like the Apollo in Glasgow had to be adapted to fit the new demands placed on it by touring musicians; in the Apollo's case, this meant raising the stage to a height of 15 feet to improve the general visibility of the bands who played there. Stage sets in the UK, therefore, had to be designed to fit what was a network of proscenium-arch and end-on stages, with more elaborate and extensive performances limited to the larger spaces like Earls' Court. In the States, arena spaces were larger and more flexible (and far more numerous), and the audience's sightlines

weren't as fixed. It was therefore easier, in those types of spaces, to create large-scale sets that included complex staging.

The technicians who created these new, overtly theatrical touring sets came, first of all, from the crews who had worked in venues in the 1960s. Organising lighting and sound in places like the Fillmore and the UFO club gave a generation of lighting and sound designers both practical experience in fitting into found spaces and a network of contacts with musicians who would, in the next few years, move on to the arena and theatre circuits in the US and the UK. To take one paradigmatic example: Edward 'Chip' Monck's career in lighting design began in the nightclubs of Greenwich village in 1959, after which he moved to the Apollo Theater in Harlem. He was involved in lighting the Newport Folk and Jazz festivals, but his breakthrough came with the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 – his work is captured on D.A. Pennebaker's film of the event.⁵¹ This led to other festival commissions; for example, Edward Monck designed a distinctive set, in the shape of a half-shell, for a festival in Miami in 1968. He also fell into Bill Graham's orbit, working on the renovation of the Fillmore theatres at the end of the decade. Monck designed the lighting and the staging for both the Woodstock and Altamont festivals in 1969 (at Woodstock, he also MCed the event). His work in a variety of venues and sites meant that most of the significant US and UK bands and artists of the time had experience of his lighting, staging, and sound designs. When the Rolling Stones mounted tours of the US in 1969 and 1972, they commissioned Monck to design both the lighting and the sound for the tours. Audiences who attended those gigs in 1972 saw a rather conventional end-on show, with the drums on a raised platform and a line of monitor speakers along the front of the stage. But the apparently simple staging was itself very innovative; Monck, working with a younger associate called Michael Callahan, had devised a

system that used Mylar mirrors to bounce the light from spots behind the stage down on to the musicians (this removed the need for a heavy, overladen gantry).

Monck was not involved in the Rolling Stones' next US tour (*The Tour of the Americas*, as it was called; the shows ran through 1975 and 1976). The stage set for this tour was as far removed from the conventional as it was possible to imagine:

To a 'Dawn of Man'-type prelude from some undisclosed source, the huge leek-shaped tube behind the ... stage started to unpeel in segments – and there, perched high on the tip of one of the descending petals, was the awful Mick himself. The stage flattened bouncily out, Mick began jumping up and down on the end of it, and the whopping chords of *Honky Tonk Woman* [sic] cracked out into the darkness.⁵²

The stage set whose operations seemed to baffle the young Martin Amis (sent to review the gig for the *New Statesman*) was, at that point, the most expensive arena show yet staged (costing something in the region of \$1.6 million), and, in its fully operational version, it was also one of the most striking. The stage opened out like a lotus whose segments could be raised and lowered during the gig (at least in those venues equipped to take the hydraulic equipment required) to reveal a stage slightly raked down to the audience.⁵³ The stage floor was painted with paisley patterns, suggesting (in a form that was, in the context of the time) the Stones' continued allegiance to the countercultural London scene of the later 1960s, and, more generally, a sense of the band as exotic outsiders, occupying a location more colourfully louche than the audience. If the audience needed any further evidence of precisely how louche the band were prepared to be, the stage could provide it:

Accompanying this feature [the hydraulic operation of the petals] were several others, most notoriously a giant phallus that would unveil itself and stand erect during the band's performance of the song "Star Star," an ode to a groupie that appeared on *Goat's Head Soup*. Such lowbrow humor allowed the Stones to keep their "earthy" image intact but the overall scale of the display indicated they were a band that spared no expense to produce a show fitted to the outsized arena setting.⁵⁴

This rather intrusive (in all senses of the word) prop was at least closely associated with the Stones' overly sexualised image. To make this reading unmissable, Jagger rode the penis during the song. It also helped to give the tour a certain notoriety (and nearly led to the banning of one gig, in San Antonio, Texas). It would be possible to construct a complex reading of the staging, and to note that the set blended elements that could be read as stereotypically female – the opened flower of the set, dominated by the male musicians – with a clear symbol of male power at the centre of the stage. However, even if the audience did not pause to ponder the pop-culturally misogynistic Freudianism of the stage design, they would be aware that it conveyed a general sense of the band as a group of hypersexualised libertines, patrolling the edges of legality.

The staging (which was based on a concept devised by the group's drummer, Charlie Watts, and which was designed by Robin Wagner, who worked in the US theatre industry) allowed the Stones to recuperate the outlaw status they had occupied in the late 1960s; but as Waksman points out, it did something more. Rather than simply providing illumination and an acceptable sound balance, the staging served to elevate the status of the musicians:

Jules Fisher has designed a lighting system that will bring the size of the performer out into the hall, bring the audience toward the performer and communicate all the power, emotion and rhythm of the Stones' musical creativity. The stage will be illuminated in sections so that as one area of light is fading, another area can be made brighter and give the appearance of the light itself actually moving around the stage with the performers.⁵⁵

Wagner also extended the design out into the auditorium, creating one of the most iconic early examples of extended scenography. The petals' undersides were covered with aluminium, so that at the beginning of the show reflected light would bounce off into the audience. As the petals descended, strips of fabric hanging from the ceiling of the venue were pulled up into the lighting rig, revealing the band; the fabric hung in drapes, visible to the crowd, through the gig. Originally, Fischer had planned something even more spectacularly inclusive for the Madison Square Garden show:

Interviewed on the beginning of the tour Jules Fischer told *Rolling Stone* magazine "Wait till you see the Madison Square Garden show, It'll be decorated like a garden: hundreds of leaves on cables leading to the stage and the petals of the stage will be closed to resemble a tree trunk. The petals will open to show the band and Mick will rise on an elevator and we'll project flying eagles all over the audience... The leaves, ten-foot leaves will rise on hydraulic pistons and there'll be neon rimming on the stage. It'll be beautiful." (RS Issue 191) According to Dave Marsh in *Rolling Stone*, the 350 ten-foot leaves made of white gauze with silver foil trim removed from the ceiling of

Madison Square Garden before the show because they were considered ineffective and too much of a temptation to ... the audience.⁵⁶

Even if such a full-scale redesign of the space proved impractical, Wagner and Fischer managed to create a stage that allowed the audience to connect with the event in some rather more subtle ways. For example, rather than standing on either side of the performers, the PA speakers were hung around the circumference of the circular lighting ring, further freeing up sightlines for an arena crowd. This, and the overall aesthetic of the staging, marked arguably the first full manifestation of the kind of theatrical environments that have come to predominate in mid-scale and large-scale touring. The audience going to see the Stones in the mid-1970s were ensured of a technologically striking spectacle, and that spectacle would be in most respects the same – irrespective of the date of the performance or the location of the venue.

Conclusion

One of the avowed aims of the technicians who worked on the liquid lightshows in the late 1960s was to provide a scenographic element that united the stage and the auditorium. The staging of the Stones tour in 1975/1976 shows that logic playing itself out, in a way that allied the tour to other genres of the time, such as Glam, Metal, and Funk. This combination – overtly dynamic, striking staging that aimed to at least partially conform to and confirm the knowledge the audience brought with them to the gig, and that aimed also to provide an evolving environment that was, as far as possible, opened up to and inclusive of the audience, and that framed the performer's presence in an appropriate fashion – became, over the course of the next few decades, the industry standard for touring (at least once the

band or artist had attained enough success to warrant investment in the staging of live shows). By the mid-1970s, the line of development was clearly apparent; major changes in the configuration of the performances came through developments in technology, rather than in the organisation of the event. By the mid-1970s, the various elements that define contemporary popular music staging had been developed, and most of them had been extensively road tested; and the kind of bespoke stage environments developed for genres like Progressive Rock (and, to a lesser extent, for other early 1970s genres such as Glam) were being adopted by other bands in other genres such as Metal, Progressive Pop (a useful genre label, well described and analysed by [Bennett \(2020\)](#) as a melding of the compositional complexity of Progressive Rock and the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic directness of Pop⁵⁷), and hard rock. Seen in this light, Steeleye Span's awkward mummer's play was not an outlier, or an odd intrusion into the normal practices of live popular music. Performatively, it was part of the mainstream; during the crowded decade between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, aesthetic, social, economic, and industrial factors worked together to push the performance of popular music in one direction – from performances that relied on the fame and dynamism of the artist, to performances that placed the artist within a bespoke, designed scenography.

By the mid-1970s and the Stones' lotus stage, therefore, the framings discussed in the previous chapter were all in place. From then until now, the types of technology employed in the events might vary, but the constituent elements (expanded scenography, multimedia presentation, the creation of a bespoke environment for the band, and, to a lesser extent, the audience) have remained fixed. The accelerated development of staging techniques in popular music also helps to explain the ambiguous relation between framings described above. Staging techniques developed ad hoc, in

response to shifting audience expectations, generic and industry pressures, and the fact that artists needed to create clear identities for themselves and for their work. At the same time, the audience's expectations became simultaneously more complex and more specific, as the number of people who could access scenographically framed performances grew, and as genres and artists themselves developed over the period. Those expectations could, by the end of the 1970s, embrace everything from stripped back, simple stage design (Punk, for example, defaulted to flat floors, and simple, strong lighting washes) to the technologically elaborate (ELO toured the album *Out of the Blue* with a stage set modelled on the spaceship on the album's cover: at the end of the band's late 1970s gigs, Earth Wind and Fire's Maurice White departed the stage in a flying pyramid). Perhaps the only link between all of the diverging and interacting scenographic approaches that emerged from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s was the very idea that the event should be framed; in other words, that the performance of popular music was something significant and lucrative enough to require something more elaborate, and more culturally significant, than the barest, simplest stage.

Notes

1. Young 2010, p. 265. [↗](#)
2. Young 2010, p. 543. [↗](#)
3. 'Steeleye Span: Steeleye Sold Out?' Harry Doherty, *Melody Maker*, 8 November 1975. [↗](#)
4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_412rBDRL8k [↗](#)
5. At one moment, the band drop in a passing nod to The Goons; the audience misses it entirely. [↗](#)

6. Frith et al. 2013, p. 77. [↵](#)
7. <https://www.concertarchives.org/bands/the-beatles> [↵](#)
8. Davis 2002. [↵](#)
9. Qtd in [Waksman 2022](#), p. 340. [↵](#)
10. Harris 1963. [↵](#)
11. Shumway 2014, p. 28. [↵](#)
12. See, for example, [Whiteley 1992](#), [Collins 2020](#), [Julien et al. 2016](#), [Thompson 2008](#), Adelt 2010, [Cottrell 2015](#) et al. [↵](#)
13. Waksman 2022, p. 436. [↵](#)
14. *Scene: Underground* Granada TV, 27 January 1967. [↵](#)
15. Reising and LeBlanc, in [Julien et al. 2016](#), p. 104. [↵](#)
16. Stiernberg 2014. [↵](#)
17. Zinman 2008, p. 18. [↵](#)
18. Mason, Nick *Inside Out: A Personal History of Pink Floyd* Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2004, pp. 71–2. [↵](#)
19. Marks 2016. [↵](#)
20. This can be clearly in film, taken by Warhol, of a performance in Boston in 1967; footage can be found here – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUItHwUcl54&t=226s> [↵](#)
21. Van Meter 2017. [↵](#)
22. For more on Warhol, the Velvet Underground, and the EPI, see [Albiez and Pattie 2022](#). [↵](#)
23. John Lennon, in *The Beatles At Shea Stadium*, Dir: Robert Precht, Subafilms 1966. [↵](#)
24. Lee 1998. [↵](#)
25. Pattie 2007. [↵](#)
26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLG0T2IeGBY&t=635s> [↵](#)
27. Waksman 2011, p. 110. [↵](#)

28. The first guitar pedals were developed in the late 1930s, to create vibrato and tremelo effects; they can be heard on Bo Diddley's 1955 hit, 'Bo Diddley.' [!\[\]\(953b90cdf85df32fb0fbc12e06e3deab_img.jpg\)](#)
29. Walker 2013, p. 124. [!\[\]\(05b225460cf94492822ed9eaf4bc781c_img.jpg\)](#)
30. Alice Cooper: Madison Square Garden, NYC Charles Shaar Murray, New Musical Express, 30 June 1973. [!\[\]\(8c9db6ed874cd4f65f8685846b69affd_img.jpg\)](#)
31. Slaven 2003, p. 127. [!\[\]\(f3abc9fadd68f2404501784e9111294a_img.jpg\)](#)
32. 'Don't Eat the Yellow Snow,' *You Can't Do That On Stage Any More Vol 1*. [!\[\]\(b76286795e88cb5419d2c6c5b9a7f502_img.jpg\)](#)
33. 'Intro: Little House I Used To Live In,' *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*, 1970. [!\[\]\(bf4582b012e743743998e788a60b67ae_img.jpg\)](#)
34. Reynolds 2017, p. 123. [!\[\]\(0f690e39626f008f47597151623962fd_img.jpg\)](#)
35. Chambers 2013, p. 451. [!\[\]\(24d4c6dba3adcf9c601bb8c098b93dc6_img.jpg\)](#)
36. Bolden 2013, pp. 12–13. [!\[\]\(828ce8bc0ab4dac3e1a0884d0aad2baf_img.jpg\)](#)
37. 'Funkadelic: When The Circus Hit Town' Phil Symes, *Disc and Music Echo*, 5 June 1971. [!\[\]\(866c0c21fc3c8e00f3387ccadfa08ff7_img.jpg\)](#)
38. Gibbs 1973. [!\[\]\(49a4f36582218dbc6b6815178d643986_img.jpg\)](#)
39. Auslander 2006. [!\[\]\(011e2863a9fb74db87040674ffb45c5b_img.jpg\)](#)
40. Auslander 2004, p. 39. [!\[\]\(91504937f29055784e7ad6280119474b_img.jpg\)](#)
41. Stratton 2021, p. 214. [!\[\]\(8fbb68dbc03250cdd49923c1cdc3caaf_img.jpg\)](#)
42. Frith 2016, pp. 26–7. [!\[\]\(c4c04dc5190be1907cb4ccd5bbe7bd4a_img.jpg\)](#)
43. Even though Anderson's persona changed over the decade (by its end he had moved from tramp to louche country squire) the iconic stance remained. [!\[\]\(6d22e04559970e3ef822f2de206dbdcd_img.jpg\)](#)
44. Anderton 2024; as he points out, the term idiolect usually covers the musical elements that are unique to those bands and artists who operate within a specific genre. Anderson argues, convincingly, that

the term should also be extended to the visual and social material associated with genres. ↵

45. Hegarty and Halliwell 2011, p. 70. ↵

46. Macan 1997. ↵

47. This was faked; the piano was an empty frame. ↵

48. For more on the complex relation between Progressive Rock and the 1970s, see [Johnes 2018](#). ↵

49. Johnson 1974. ↵

50. Footage of the *Diamond Dogs* tour is available on the BBC documentary *Cracked Actor*, first broadcast in 1975. ↵

51. *Monterey Pop*, released in 1968. ↵

52. Amis 1993, p. 96. ↵

53. There were two versions of the set: the one with hydraulics was used in major venues on the US East and West coasts, and the one without hydraulics was reserved for arenas in less prominent venues. ↵

54. Waksman 2022, p. 452. ↵

55. Rolling Stones tour press packet, qtd in [Waksman 2022](#), p. 454. ↵

56. <http://concertstagedesign.blogspot.com/2011/04/the-rolling-stones-tour-of-americas.html> – this site contains detailed sketches and photographs of the stage and the lighting rig. ↵

57. Bennett 2020: bands from this hybrid genre (10cc, the Electric Light Orchestra, and Queen) were some of the most popular of the time. ↵

3

SCENOGRAPHIC TECHNOLOGIES

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Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, by the mid-1970s all of the scenographic framings that we have come to associate with live popular music were in place. Bands (if they had the requisite industry investment) used bespoke lighting rigs and designs; the idea that staging should reflect and extend the identity of the artist or band had been fully accepted; and all of the standard accoutrements of the larger gig (the projections, the live feeds carrying the image of the performer, the evolving, transforming stages) had been tried, even if, in some cases, the technology wasn't yet equal to the strains of touring.¹ These basic elements have been reworked; digital technologies have made the deployment of scenographic elements more reliable, and they have also enabled those technologies to be integrated, and some new elements have been added (walkways and B-stages, which extend the stage out into the midst of the crowd). These new elements, however, themselves built on a template already established in the early days of stadium and arena shows. As the various technologies framing live work developed, their use diversified. As I've noted, there was a strong, market-based imperative for this – bands and artists had to establish identities that both marked them as different from others in the same and different genres, and

at the same time to demonstrate their relation to the musical styles their audiences favoured. Alongside this, over time the technology itself became more flexible, and could therefore be used to respond to specific moments in the performance, or to trigger specific responses in the audience, or to establish a visual identity that could both demonstrate something about the artists' relation to the wider world, and the artists' awareness of and relation to the performance history they shared with their more dedicated fans. Any discussion of the role of technology in popular music performance, therefore, needs to take two things into account – both the general application of scenographic technology, and the specific ways in which individual artists and bands employ lighting and stage design to frame their performances.

Technology and scenography

Sam Fender's set, the penultimate performance on Glastonbury's main stage, on 24 June 2022, was by common consent one of the key performances of the festival. 2022 was always likely to prove a significant year; it was the first full event after the pandemic, and the headliners (Billie Eilish, Paul McCartney, and Kendrick Lamar) spanned between them 60 years of popular music history. Fender had not expected to play at the festival, but when the rapper Doja Cat pulled out he found himself near the top of the bill. This, for a musician with a rapidly rising reputation as a generational spokesman, was an opportunity; the BBC cover Glastonbury extensively, the event itself has become a showcase for musicians, and the festival is one of the most significant annual events in music. Moreover, Fender had missed the festival once before:

The North Shields star was set to make his Glastonbury debut in the John Peel tent in 2019, before he was forced to pull out due to illness. “Hopefully we’ll get a chance to return next year,” he wrote at the time, before, well, nobody did that until now. But as the heavy clouds miraculously parted and sun came through as his guitars got going for his long-awaited debut, it feels like it couldn’t have been any other way.²

This review, from the *NME* (a staunch supporter, in both its print and online incarnations, of guitar rock), catches another, incidental advantage of being second last on the bill. If the weather holds, the penultimate act will be on stage just as the sun is going down, and sure enough, when Fender began to play the opening chords of ‘Seventeen Going Under,’ the sky obliged with a spectacular sunset. Footage of the performance captures the crowd’s excited response: a loud cheer when the first chords are played, loud singing during the verses, smoke from handheld flares drifting over the audience, flags waving, and at the end of the song the crowd take up the wordless hook, singing it loudly even after the musicians have finished.

The performance captures the contradictory nature of the track. Lyrically, like Fender’s other work, it is a despairing account of growing up in the decaying post-industrial Northeast, family tensions sharpened by poverty, drink, drugs, and behind it all the sense that society itself is frayed beyond repair. Against this, the music, which utilises the simple chord structures more normally associated with Bruce Springsteen, placed against a strict metronomic beat favoured by bands like The War on Drugs, is triumphant, almost anthemic. The band can call on the resources of the Glastonbury stage (a PA system developed for festivals, an extensive lighting rig, facilities for image projection and so on), and they run a version of the light and video plots used on Fender’s 2022 tour. But the screen (on which the

song's lyrics flash up in red capitals against a black-and-white image) and the lighting (flashing whites and reds, synched to the music) do not get much chance to register against the evening light. Footage shot from the crowd clearly demonstrates what the technology has to compete with; no matter how elaborate the lighting plan or the images, they have to compete with the rather spectacular sunset; the *NME* reviewer, quoted above, noted 'the sun coming through' – which would indicate that it was at least a partial distraction. The performance would also have to compete with the fact that the people watching can easily see each other. This means that the audience's attention is necessarily dispersed, more than it would normally be in an arena; and the footage catches spectators turning their back on the stage, engaging in conversation with each other, and mugging for the camera.³ The track carries a powerful affective charge, but its impact is to an extent dispersed, because the audience's relation to the scenography is more tenuous than it would be in other venues.

Earlier that year, on the 26th March, Fender played the OVO Arena in Glasgow; and once again 'Seventeen Going Under' was a significant part of the set. This time, though, the technological framing of the performance allows the musicians to shape the song's affect more precisely than was possible at Glastonbury. Of course, the conditions are different, and the audience is self-selecting – composed of people who have chosen to see Fender, rather than to be at Glastonbury. Everyone involved with staging and performing the show can therefore work on the assumption that, from the beginning, this audience has a deeper investment in the music than the Glastonbury crowd. This allows the musicians more freedom in the presentation of the tracks. For example, before 'Seventeen Going Under' proper begins, Fender talks to the audience, as the keyboards play the song's opening chords beneath him, and rather than the abrupt start they

employed at Glastonbury, the band move smoothly into the song proper. A festival audience might not have the patience to focus on Fender's words; after all, they are not his audience – they are a Glastonbury crowd, who would have bought their tickets long before that year's bill was finalised. The Glasgow audience have paid money and set aside time to see Sam Fender – so when he speaks, they are far more likely to pay attention.

But even a partisan audience is prone to distraction, given that a gig is both a performance and a social event. Their attention must be captured and recaptured throughout, and it is here that the extended scenographies described above (see [Chapter 1](#)) fulfil their most important function. To return to the Glasgow performance: initially, the auditorium is dark, meaning that changes in lighting states and positions have more of a chance to register, and the PA system is one designed for the tour, rather than for the festival. Crucially, too, the scenographic elements that structure the performance are clearly visible to every audience member, even those looking at the stage from an angle. The lighting and images, also specifically designed for the event, have the same key features (flashing white and red, with the same bold red lyrics projected on to black-and-white images – this time live feeds of the band onstage) as the Glastonbury performance. However, as with the sound the lighting is now fully adapted to the tour, which means that the song's different sections can be framed separately, and the audience's response can be cued more directly. Before the track proper, the stage is illuminated by strip lights running along the stepped platforms behind Fender and by sidelights on the floor on either side of the stage. He introduces the song by talking about the sudden spike in his popularity; as he does, a bright white strip, on the leading edge of the lighting rig, shines directly down on the crowd, as if he is explicitly identifying the people in the crowd as responsible for his success. When the

track begins, six rectangular lighting rigs are positioned only a few feet above the musicians. The effect is to narrow the focus of the audience's attention, almost as though the first, quieter verse is performed in close-up (an effect enhanced by the video screens on either side of the stage, which frame Fender in a black-and-white mid-shot). On the last line of the first verse, just as the song is poised to gather intensity, the rectangular lighting rigs are lifted up, expanding the visible stage space, and the bright strip on the lighting rig is illuminated again, providing the audience with a performative clue to match what they know is coming – and they respond (the volume of the singing rises, the crowd begins to dance).

As the above examples illustrate, technology, in any type of performance, is enhanced in some circumstances and less effective in others. In a festival, where only the headliner would be playing after sunset, a complex lighting plan for those playing earlier in the day is mostly a waste of time. The default position is the one adopted by Fender's crew – there is enough on stage to suggest the kind of performative world Fender will inhabit at his own gigs, but that has to be accommodated to the constraints of the festival stage. In an arena, where Fender's technical team have as close to complete control as they are ever likely to have, it is easier for them to construct an environment that both expresses the audience's relation to the music and that to an extent controls that response. However, it would be wrong to see the difference between the two performances as the simple working out of a contest between the relative authority of the audience and the resources available to the technologically supported and enhanced performer. This is, as I argue in [Chapter 1](#), an exercise in expanded scenography; that is, in the use of scenographic elements to foreground the relationship of the spectators to the event. In both Glastonbury and Glasgow, the performer, the audience, and the technology that enables the performance have to

respond to engage in what Rachel Hann would term an exercise in place orientation; there are:

Methods of spectatorship are governed and sustained by methods of place orientation. Equally, theatrical design practices and staging techniques have always sought to exploit the affective qualities of orientation, whether through scale, performer blocking, light colour, sound tempo or the profile of a costume. All are methods of orienting a body-event relationship that alters or crafts an encounter *with* space.⁴

For touring musicians and the technicians that crew the shows, place orientation is an everyday concern. As I noted in the previous chapter, when modern touring networks evolved in the late 1960s and early 1970s they came to occupy found spaces, and those spaces were, and are, not always ideal for the performance of music. Theatres, dance halls, and cinemas were not built to a fixed template, and each one would have its own idiosyncrasies (the height of the stage at the Glasgow Apollo, for example). As also noted in the previous chapter, bespoke multipurpose venues like arenas were not designed specifically for popular musicians. In practice, this meant that touring shows had to be designed flexibly – even if a tour only played a certain type of venue, those venues would not be exactly the same, and the complex technologies that supported performance had to deal with the differences. This in turn meant that, for the most successful acts, technical support required more investment and more specialisation, and the development of systems that could function in variable locations. For PA systems, this meant increasing power, increasing visibility (the Grateful Dead, unhappy with the current state of onstage amplification in the mid-1970s, developed their own PA system, the Wall of Sound, a 75-foot-high arrangement of amplifiers and speakers), and increasing sophistication (tri-

amping, to separate the signal into different frequencies that would go to different speakers; time-aligning speakers, so that, in larger venues, the sound would appear to reach all parts of the auditorium in sync with the visuals). For lighting and set design, the more successful musicians would either limit themselves to one type of venue (it is hard to imagine The Weeknd's *After Hours til Dawn* stage set in an arena: its full effect is only apparent in a stadium), or, like the Rolling Stones on their 40th anniversary tour, develop versions of the same basic stage layout to fit theatres, arenas, and stadia.

However, place orientation, in live music performances, means something more than marrying the technology to the peculiar challenges of each venue. It means that the space, once it is reconfigured, has to accommodate more than the necessary elements that make the show work. Essentially, what it has come to mean is that the venue itself has to be reoriented – made over, as far as is feasible, into a space which signifies the artist; the music; the images and the performative codes associated with him, her, or them; and the audience's assumptions about all of these elements. In other words, as noted above, in popular music performance technology is used to create a scenographic, rather than a dramaturgical, relation between the performer, the audience, and the space. In Hann's terms, this could be thought of as an example of scenographic worlding; that is, that scenographic technologies allow us to perform our relation to the narratives, objects, histories, physical manifestations, and symbolic framings that surround us:

[Scenographies] score orders of world by highlighting, irritating, othering how worlds are conceptualized as affective atmospheres. Scenographies are produced by the intersection of world narratives (what belongs) and materialities (what materializes). Worlding

orientations are, therefore, equally concerned with matters of imagination as they are with the design of objects. In this description is the nub of scenographics – that scenographics allow us to perform world differently.⁵

In other words, scenographies (in Hann's sense of the word) include the audience, but in doing so, they do more than simply create a space within which the audience and the musicians can immerse themselves. They open up places in which all of the framings that shape the performance can be variously presented and experienced. As noted in the previous chapter, when the leaves of the lotus stage opened in 1975, revealing the Rolling Stones, the crowd were not simply invited to observe a transforming stage. Implicitly, in the stage design, they were also invited into the performance space alongside the band – the stage opens out to the audience, and the band play out to them, walking out along stage sections that have become, in effect, small catwalks projecting out into the auditorium. The transfigured stage isn't simply a striking piece of technology; implicitly, it actively foregrounds the changing relationship of the spectators to the event – and in doing so, it enables them to experience, to *be with* (to use Hann's term) the appropriate affective atmosphere. In doing so, as noted above, it creates a space that is shaped, at least to an extent, by the complex structures of knowledge that govern the event, both for the audience and for the musicians.

Technology, therefore, has two roles in this type of performance. Firstly, it does more than simply facilitating the event; it enables the experience to be standardised and to an extent controlled. Wherever the audience encounter the performance, they will experience something that is as much as possible equivalent to the experience of other audiences in other venues. Technology standardises, but technology also orients both musicians and

audience to a particular place, constructed both from the physical constraints of the venue and the imagined space created as a network of shared meanings, images, and memories. Technology, in this context, is severely practical, in that it makes the performer visible and audible, no matter what idiosyncrasies the venue contains, and it also aims to create an imaginative environment that embraces the audience and that works to confirm the audience's understanding of the musician. In the rest of this chapter, I will look at three examples in which technology both creates a viable performance space and allows both musicians and audiences to connect both with each other and with the wider network of meanings and associations that surround their shared investment in the music. They are, if you like, exercises in place orientation, but the nature of that place is multiply determined, framed by all of the complex interactions between the musicians, the audience, and the location.

Kraftwerk: Technology and history

In 1970, an embryonic version of the influential German band Kraftwerk was filmed performing some of the avant-garde tracks on their first album at Soest, near the band's base in Dusseldorf. For anyone familiar with the band's later work, the performance looks rather strange. For one thing, the band was a trio at this point in their history; the two founder members (Ralf Hutter and Florian Schneider) were joined by the drummer Klaus Dinger (who would himself go on to found Neu! – a band in some ways as influential as Kraftwerk). The band started with 'Stratovarious' – an assaultive piece of proto-electronica, with Hutter generating bouts of atonal sound from a portable keyboard, slung around his neck. The audience's response was, it is fair to say, mixed. When Dinger took up the beat, some responded, nodding their heads in time, but at least one audience member

stuck his fingers in his ears.⁶ The next track, 'Ruckzuck,' at least elicited a more positive response, but even here the audience seemed rather disconnected. Partly, this could be attributed to the unfamiliarity of the music. At this point, Kraftwerk were a new band, and their work (both its content and its style) was unfamiliar to the audience; moreover, the style of music they played (which came to be known, rather slightly, as Krautrock) never gained a wide acceptance in Germany. Partly, though, it had to do with the layout of the venue and the positioning of technology within the space. The room was a very basic performance venue, with a stage at one end where the band performed. Most of the audience were standing, or sitting on the floor. The band were positioned off to the audience's right, surrounded (in fact, almost dwarfed) by speakers and amps. The place they'd normally be expected to occupy, directly in front of the audience, was taken up by a large screen, carrying close-ups of the musicians, and once, incongruously given the nature of the event, a reminder to the audience that Christmas was coming. Even though the set contained all the technologies that Kraftwerk would use in their later careers (electronic or processed instrumentation and projection screens), there was something off-kilter about the set-up. All of the elements were there, but working against each other, rather than together. The band were not visually or performatively interesting enough to hold the audience, and the technology both dwarfed them and pushed them off to the side of the space. Given the nature of the event, and the fact that this was a new, raw band, one can guess that no thought at all was given to the scenographic impact of the performance, and looking at the footage it is hard to imagine a more awkward set of scenic relations. The organisation of technology in the space seems to have been expressly designed to forbid any sense of connection between musicians and audience.

By 2018, things were very different. The band had released a string of influential albums in the 1970s and early 1980s (from *Autobahn* (1974) through to *Computer World* (1981)). After a hiatus in the 1980s, the band gradually returned to touring in the 1990s, presenting a carefully remixed curated assemblage of material from their albums from *Autobahn* onwards. By that time, Kraftwerk's place in music history was undergoing radical reassessment – a process that has continued through the first decades of the 21st century. The band have been the subject of a number of biographies ([Barr 1998](#), [Bussy 2001](#), [Buckley 2015](#), [Schutte 2020](#)), and their music had been included in a number of critical and historical studies ([Albiez and Pattie 2011](#), [Schutte 2023](#), [Adelt 2016](#), [Stubbs 2018](#), [Dallach 2025](#)). Moreover, the version of Kraftwerk taking the stage in Helsinki on the 15th February were both physically and scenographically a very different band to the Kraftwerk of 1970. Only one original member (Ralf Hutter) was still in place; the band's co-founder, Florian Schneider, left the group in 2008. Normally, a band only containing one original member might justifiably be regarded as an inferior version of the original. This, though, had not affected the audience's perception of Kraftwerk. Partly, this was because they had preserved a certain distance from their fans (interviews with Hutter and Schneider tended to be exercises in image creation and maintenance). But another, more obvious reason for the continued acceptance of this version of Kraftwerk was that the visual identity of the band was, by 2018, very strongly fixed. Four musicians, standing at what seemed to be lecterns, against a large, rectangular video screen; if these elements were in place, and the images and music confirmed it, the technological arrangement of the stage was sufficient to confirm the band's identity. This meant that when Kraftwerk took the stage in 2018, despite significant changes in personnel, the technologies surrounding and enabling the performance enabled the

kind of place orientation Hann describes above; when the performance started, Kraftwerk's presence was demonstrated, not so much by the musicians, but by the layout of the stage and the deployment of visual technologies.

I have argued elsewhere⁷ that the gradual evolution of Kraftwerk's live performances has reflected a rather complex attitude, both to post-war German history and to the influence of technology on everyday life. As Benjamin Tallis has noted, Kraftwerk and the German experimental bands of the early 1970s had a rather problematic relationship to their country. The past contained horrors that had not been fully confronted, but it also contained indications of a more inclusive, more cosmopolitan future that could be accessed, paradoxically, by embracing the stalled experiments of the past. For Kraftwerk, this meant reaching back before the Hitlerian interregnum to the pan-European modernism of the Bauhaus:

Interwar Modernism, upon which Kraftwerk drew broadly, was inherently and avowedly cosmopolitan, as an influential slogan from the time asserted: 'Stupidity is national. Intelligence is international' ... Hütter spoke explicitly of reviving a 'Central European' identity and of the band's sense of European belonging, which they also wished to inspire in others. This reflects Germany's particular relation to the postwar European project and is most prominent on the songs 'Trans-Europe Express' and 'Europe Endless' ... Kraftwerk drew on international modernists including (French) composers Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Boulez ... and (Russian) artist El Lissitzky.⁸

This avowed connection to the history of their country gave Kraftwerk a clear aesthetic template. From *Autobahn* onwards, the band's image looked both backward and forward: back to the geometrically precise Modernist

aesthetic of the Bauhaus, and forward to a world in which new technologies were to become more and more closely integrated into everyday life. The musicians were sleek, besuited, and short-haired; the staging placed new technologies (drum machines, electronic keyboards, monitors, screens running footage to illustrate the music) at the forefront of the band's live shows. The evolution of Kraftwerk's live shows fits neatly into a band philosophy, outlined in interviews Hutter and Schneider gave in the 1970s. Kraftwerk, they said, were exemplars of the 'man machine'; not cyborg hybrids, but avatars of a new, technologically integrated future. In part, this was a self-consciously ironic play on the cultural stereotype of the emotionless, efficient German (Kraftwerk's public presentation has always contained a fair measure of quiet satire). In part, it was fuelled by an interest in the fact that new technologies were getting smaller, more flexible, and more portable – and therefore more closely bound to the quotidian world.

It took time for this to be successfully reflected in the band's live shows (for an account of the difficulties the band encountered in its early years, see [Albiez and Pattie \(2011\)](#)). However, the extensive tour the band undertook in 1981, in support of the *Computer World* album, represented something of a breakthrough. The band's Dusseldorf studio, Kling Klang, had itself become an iconic part of their identity; Hutter and Schneider talked about the studio as a technological playground, in which the human and technological components of the band could meet as equals. As Schneider put it, 'We are more like vehicles, a part of our mensch machine, our man-machine. Sometimes we play the music, sometimes the music plays us, sometimes ... it plays.'⁹ For the 1981 tour, the studio itself went on the road, as a set of modular units that could be taken out of their studio setting and reassembled in different venues night after night:

It took a lot of work to make the Kling Klang Studio transportable, to really stage it, to put it into situation. All the parts are connected, it's a new conception of Kraftwerk: before it was studio plus live, now it's live studio, we play the studio on stage... The identity of 'Computer World', the mechanic of instruments and the psychological side of sound and music, are the two concepts that lead to the fact that we don't have Kraftwerk anymore, but Kraftwerk and Kling Klang together.^{[10](#)}

It was not just that the new set-up enabled the band to reproduce their music more faithfully; it was that the new set-up allowed the audience access to an idealised version of the band. After all, the purely functional technologies that produced their music had been mythologised by the band themselves, and those technologies were already part of the network of images that had come to define the music and the artists. The set was visually striking, innovative (nowadays, it is common for studio technologies to be integrated seamlessly into the live event, but Kraftwerk, in the early 1980s, were quite some way ahead of the trend), and a clear extension of the artwork on *Computer World* and its predecessor, *The Man Machine*. But it was not simply that the staging was effective; it also spoke directly to the audience's knowledge of the band. Incorporating studio technology into the scenography of live performance served to reinforce the evolving mythos of Kraftwerk as musical cyborgs, inextricably wedded to their machines. After all here they were, in a neon-lit studio, the modules and instruments laid out in a V, with four monitors above them, as though the band were creating music in a corner of the Kling Klang studio, back home in Dusseldorf.

From 1981 through to 2018, the evolution of Kraftwerk's stage sets has followed the template of the *Computer World* shows. The four monitors of 1981 grew in size, and by the early 21st century had joined together to form

a substantial video screen behind the band. The V of the 1981 stage flattened out, and the analogue studio modules were replaced by digital versions, integrated into four workstations mounted on lecterns facing the audience. From workers in a musical factory, the band were now part of the modern office, their work part of the ceaseless flow of digital information that had reshaped the modern world. The band's overt use of ubiquitous digital technologies on stage has become a meme¹¹ – an obvious representation of a world where laptops and other networked technologies link us all together:

Very much a device that fits the descriptions of contemporary society in these terms, the laptop is one of a number of nomadic machines of the digital age. Allied with prospects of unfettered International travel and promulgations of a flexible capitalism traversing the globe in networked circuits, the laptop is the image of the quick, mobile and efficient device. In a perspective of relationality, it is yet another node in a network of hubs, flows and networks, representing a new technological paradigm organized around powerful but flexible information technologies and information processing devices. From the perspective of spatiality it is emblematic of socio-technical practices inherent in a new urban metabolism.¹²

The 2018 stage set is a model of this quick, flexible, mobile, and efficient world; it is a hymn to digital integration – but it is also a hymn to the past. To the band's past, first of all; some of the images (the old computer console of *Computer World*, the wire-frame figures from the cover of *Electric Café*, the stylised train and tracks from *Trans-Europe Express*) come either from the albums' original packaging (or from redesigned, reissued versions), or are holdovers from the films used on previous tours.

But also, the images explicitly reference the German and European histories whose violent interruption gave Kraftwerk the initial impetus to create their work. The footage of German motorways used on earlier tours has, by 2018, been replaced by CGI images of cars travelling up and down the clean, bright road pictured on the original album cover. The cars are old models (a 1970s Mercedes-Benz and a Volkswagen Beetle feature prominently), and the landscape and the sky have the simple, vivid colours of first-generation video games. The unfolding images might be seamlessly integrated into the flow of the music, but they seem to have come from a more optimistic world – a world informed by the utopianism of the Bauhaus, or the technological confidence of the *Wirtschaftswunder*.¹³ And the images, as they are throughout, are in 3D: a device used in colour films in the 1950s (and revived, for a while) in the 1990s. The audience, upon entering, are given a version of the flimsy cardboard 3D glasses cinema audiences in the 1950s would have worn; and for the length of the show, the images on the screen seem to float out into the auditorium, closer to the crowd than the musicians. A retro technology, placing the audience not just within the event but also in the band's history, and in global history, allowing them to travel, as Kraftwerk travel, into both the future and the past.

Prince: Technology and identity

Prince's last major tour of the 1980s, in support of the album *Lovesexy*, came to Dortmund on the 9th September 1988; the show was filmed for broadcast in Europe. About 30 minutes into a characteristically packed and energetic performance, the band began a slow blues (variously called 'Blues in C' or 'If I Had a Harem'). Prince started the song at a microphone stand in the centre of the stage, a Telecaster strapped to his back. As the song

developed, he started to play a sequence of high, pinched notes, and (characteristically) each note was accompanied by a piece of self-conscious theatre. The first note knocked the tour's dancer and backing vocalist, Cat, off her feet; the next, it seemed, made Prince stumble across the front of the stage. Chastened, he sat, legs crossed, on the edge of the main stage platform, and played a jazz-inflected solo – but when he stood, another high, pinched guitar note knocked him backwards once more. It was a small, throwaway moment of theatre, in the midst of what was by the standards of the time an elaborate, complex show, featuring an urban playground of a set, designed for in-the-round presentation, with different levels, sloping walkways, and platforms that could be raised and lowered, a replica Ford Thunderbird used for Prince's entrance and exits; and a constantly shifting lighting plot.

Prince's fans would be well used to such moments of overt theatricality. During the 1980s, he had established himself as a uniquely dangerous and enticing performer; Nic Ramos, in the article 'Toward an Epistemology of Prince,' vividly recalled the experience of watching the star with his disapproving family:

I might have not known the exact reasons that my daddy did not want me to look at Prince, but I knew it was dangerous to look. Like Sodom, I was told I was not worthy (or perhaps too worthy) to gaze on such a spectacle.¹⁴

In some ways, Prince's impact on the US in the 1980s was analogous to Bowie's on the UK in the 1970s. Bowie, culturally, was the lightning rod for wider social anxieties over decline, maleness, and gender identity; Prince sparked the same concerns, but with the addition of another set of discourses around race – and with, both in his music and in his

performances, an equally overt and fluid sexuality.¹⁵ For some sections of US society (Ramos' family, for example), the kind of complex ambiguity Prince embodied was a sure sign of incipient social collapse. The very openness of the discourses surrounding him seemed to threaten to give audiences license to explore the ambiguities in their own identities. For Rupert Till (2010) this radically ambiguous openness – this ability to incarnate the tensions within US society, without resolving them – meant that, rather than simple stardom, Prince could lay claim to the status of an icon:

The combination of an image and single name description characterises icons and differentiates them from stars. The development of icons for branding is used by the entertainment industry for marketing purposes, just as it is in the manufacturing industry. As Longhurst puts it, 'Stars function as trademarks which generate sales for the music business and the culture industries more widely' (1995, 185). The importance of image in this process has meant that artists' images have become as important to success within popular music as the quality of their music; indeed it has meant that for some artists the careful handling of branding, marketing, and image has been the dominant factor in, and feature of, their success.¹⁶

For Till, a star becomes an icon when the discourses surrounding the image become so dominant as to overwhelm any sense of the artist's own identity. An icon is a hollow image, waiting to be filled by the needs and desires of those who worship it. Prince's fluidity, Till argued, was troubling, especially given the star's professed religious faith; what kind of spiritual nourishment could an audience derive from someone who had was, as Till

put it, the kind of icon one might expect to find in a postmodern, superficial age:

Prince is selling pleasure, selling a hollow shell that makes no pretensions that anything will be found inside. His is a material and materialist religion that is rooted in the sale and use of musical artefacts. While many religions offer a spirit to live inside the body of the worshipper, Prince offers a shell to wear on the outside, a style. He is a triumph of postmodernity, of style as content. He rejects the concept of external content in a celebration of the individual. The imaginary world he has created began as a complex form of packaging for his music to try to ensure its success, but has evolved and become interwoven into his work as a vital part of a multimedia whole.^{[17](#)}

It could be said, though, that this analysis misses something crucial about both Prince's music and his performances – that is, the extent to which fluidity, or as one might put it (following DuBois) 'double consciousness,' plays an active, determining role in the construction both of Prince's music and his onstage persona:

Dubois's theory of double consciousness speaks to Prince's defying of stereotypes, power relations, and simplistic binaries. If Prince is not always looking at himself through the eyes of others that looks on in amused contempt and pity ..., he is orchestrating his lived two-ness through his musical, cinematic and sartorial strategies that challenge monochromatic notions of Blackness.^{[18](#)}

In other words, in the racially charged atmosphere of the post-war United States, there was a positive advantage in remaining, to an extent at least, a mobile signifier. As Williams points out, Blackness was considered

monochromatic, both literally and figuratively; to be Black was to be typed in a particular set of behaviours, a particular set of cultural codes, and a particular set of musical frameworks. This reading of Black identity was repeatedly challenged (Jimi Hendrix, moving between nascent Hard Rock, Blues, Soul, and experimental psychedelia; the various mutations in genres such as funk and soul; the birth of Hip-hop; and so on). Prince's challenge to the stereotypes of Blackness prevalent in US society, however, wasn't simply to declare that he resisted easy characterisation. It was to turn the question back on his audience – as the title track of the album *Controversy* put it, to ask them if he was Black, white, straight, or gay. His music displayed a similar fluidity, moving from James Brown-style funk workouts ('Housequake'), to Rock ballads ('Purple Rain'), to Beatles-influenced psychedelia ('Raspberry Beret'), and to soul/jazz crossovers ('Slow Love'). Performatively, he would move from positions of stereotyped male dominance to submissiveness, and from the star's central position to that of just another player in a tight ensemble. Lastly, his voice (generally the instrument held to be the truest reflection of the identity of the singer) was itself treated as fluid; in 1986 Prince recorded an album under the persona 'Camille' – a feminine alter-ego, created by pitch-shifting Prince's vocals. As Simon Reynolds has noted, this not only blurred Prince's gendered identity, but also linked the artist to the long-standing tradition of falsetto singing in soul and funk:

In a certain way, falsetto—as a contrived vocal technique, an “unnatural” way of using the throat, lungs, etc.—could be seen as kind of introjected technology. As with any extreme mode of singing—yodeling, Tuvan throat singing, opera, Inuit vocal games, you name it—there's almost a disembodiment of the human voice, as it is pushed to produce sounds that seem to speak of things outside earthly

existence, far beyond our physical mortal limits. That's why these forcibly etherealized vocal sounds generally connote the angelic, the extra-terrestrial, the cosmic and otherworldly. They can also be the sound of those who feel alienated from mundane normative existence, who feel like they are from some other place.¹⁹

Prince, in the context of the 1980s, definitely positioned himself as being from some other place. However, the location of that other place was never clear, and everything the artist did seemed part of an attempt to evade any attempts to fix his cultural or personal location.

In live performance, for much of the 1980s, the fluidity which was (it could be argued) Prince's chief identifying feature was constrained somewhat both by the layout of the stage and the technologies that supported performance. Footage of the artist performing in the early and mid-1980s shows that he occupied the conventional position of the star – front and centre, flanked by guitarists and bassists, with keyboards and drums at the back of the stage. Even the monumental set built for the *Sign O' The Times* concert film and tour (which placed the band in a neon-lit night-time cityscape) kept the same basic configuration. The *Lovesexy* tour, for the first time, presented Prince in the round, and although, as one might expect given his star status, he did tend to occupy the centre of the set at key moments in the production,²⁰ the design of the set enabled both Prince and those musicians not anchored to keyboards or drums to range as freely as the choreography permitted. The band has no fixed configuration; there is no default relation between the performers, or between the performers and the setting. This is made possible by a very precise lighting plot which tracks the shifts in the music exactly.²¹ But it is also made possible by the technology that allows Prince to turn pinched, high guitar notes into near slapstick.

Radio microphones and wireless instrument systems had been available to musicians since the 1970s. As with many of the technological developments outlined in the previous chapter, wireless technologies were developed largely out of necessity. The earliest wireless guitar system (developed by Ken Schaffer, and quickly adopted by bands like Kiss, Pink Floyd, and AC/DC), in part because it was safer than relying on signal paths that might not be grounded.²² Radio mics have an even longer history (being first developed at the end of the Second World War); the Rolling Stones began to use the technology in the mid-1970s, and Kate Bush wore a crudely fashioned compact radio mic for her only UK tour (*Tour of Life* 1979). Wireless technology gave artists greater freedom on stage; they were, in effect, no longer tethered to particular onstage locations, to fixed microphone positions, or by the length of an instrument's lead.²³ Wireless technology enabled AC/DC's guitarist Angus Young to demonstrate his active investment both in the band's music and in the uncontrollably schoolboyish persona he had created for himself. For Kate Bush, Madonna, and other solo singers, radio mics allowed the star's actions to be choreographed alongside those of the other onstage performers. By the time of the *Lovesexy* tour, this technology was so well-established as to be entirely unremarkable, and had been tested, time and time again, in the rigours of touring performance. In mounting the *Lovesexy* performances, therefore, Prince and the team working on the show could rely both on lighting and sound technologies that were flexible enough to follow the changes in the set list, and instrumental and vocal technologies that enabled a fluid, dynamic performance. The technology was expensive – the cost of mounting and transporting the show, allied to poor ticket sales at some venues, meant that overall it made a loss which wasn't offset against album sales (*Lovesexy* flopped in the US, bringing to an end a period of

commercial success that had begun with *1999* (1982)). The tour might not have been the most successful of Prince's career, but it did come closest to capturing the protean, unfixed identity established in his music, and all the ancillary outputs (the films, videos, album and single covers, and so on) produced in the 1980s. It summarises and showcases the fluidity that was a central part of Prince's appeal, and it can do so only because it relied on technologies that had proved their worth in arenas and other venues from the mid-1970s. These technologies, as in Kraftwerk's case, facilitated Hann's place orientation; this time, though, the place was flexible, fluid, and undefined – a mirror of the artist himself.

Taylor Swift: Technology and celebrity

Half an hour from the end of the Netflix film of Taylor Swift's *reputation* tour (filmed in Dallas in the 18th November 2018), the singer steps away from the elaborate technologies that have shaped the event, sits down at a grand piano (albeit one with a marble finish, and with the word *reputation*, in gothic script, stencilled on its side) and, before she launches into the next song, she communes with her audience:

So you guys ... I know, that, uh ... when you meet people, when you first hang out with people, you're supposed to play it cool, be sort of casual and just be like, 'Yeah, I'm having a good time with you. You guys seem cool.' But seriously, this is such an incredible crowd, I absolutely adore you. I loved you as soon as I heard you screaming. (chuckles) So we started this tour in May, and uhm ... honestly I have never experienced a tour that seemed to fly past this quickly.' Cause we're having so much fun on this tour. We're having so much fun with you guys. I can't even tell you how much...²⁴

She goes on to note the sheer logistical effort involved in the tour – 368 people on the crew, and an extra 3,200 people, working at the Dallas stadium or otherwise drafted in for the night, just to make sure the show can run. And most of all, she tells the crowd, she wants to thank them; because, without them, there would be no show. From a singer whose early work was steeped in the verities of Country music, this halting and self-deprecating thank you might seem entirely routine. Country, as a genre, relies on tropes that unite the singer and the audience, tropes that work to reinforce not simply a connection between them, but an absolute similarity. The genre trades on the idea that the same (largely white, largely working class, largely small town) experiences are known to the artist and to the listener. The star on stage might have the visible trappings of success, but at some point the life they've led has to be seen to be the one the audience still lives.

Gina [Arnold \(2021\)](#) sees this moment as unconsciously revealing – but not of anything about Swift or her audience. Rather, because the event is so heavily mediated, what the moment reveals is that Swift herself is fundamentally untrustworthy:

This is a point that seems to be recognised by Swift herself, when, at a key point in her performance, she sits at the piano and tells us that she has been on a life-long search for the 'real'—or, as she puts it, in her soliloquy, 'finding ... a love that was really something, not just the idea of something'. Clearly, she has a problem, because even as she tells her audience about her search for 'the real', she herself is the epitome of fake. Her hair is fake. Her eyelashes are fake. Her skin tone is fake. Her voice itself is fake. Her persona is fake.²⁵

In contrast to Beyoncé (whose Coachella show is also analysed in the article), for Arnold Swift's performance is an exercise in technological

insincerity. The sheer scale of the performance (which, as I'll argue below, is a key part of its impact) removes any possibility of an authentic connection between Swift and the crowd. Beyoncé's Coachella performance²⁶ links her to complex histories of Black American representation and visibility. Swift, however, is so consumed by the mediating technologies that shape the event, as to be rendered effectively invisible – a fake, whose relation to the real, offstage singer will always be unknown. Gordon makes the point that the footage both of Swift and of Beyoncé exists in a different frame of reference to videos shot by fans and posted online. On purpose, they frame the audience's reactions, in an attempt to create what Walter Benjamin would term the 'aura' created by a unique, unrepeatable artistic event:

Clearly, the filmed versions of *Reputation* and *Homecoming* are closer in spirit to mediated events than to actual performance, in Phelan's sense. But the constant emphasis on the live audience and its ecstatic gaze throughout both of them also places them in some half-live space which is co-constructed by the audience and the performer. These performances could not be fictionalised, nor could they ever be repeated. While reproducible in the Benjaminian sense, they also have an aura of sorts, which rests on the visible presence of a one-time-only audience. And this, I argue, is what is new about them.²⁷

This is a valid and valuable point. Documentaries of live shows are consciously framed to give a sense both of the performance and its impact. This means that, in the editing, audience reactions are inserted into the film as though they were the other half of a conversation – the singer asserts something (by singing, speaking, or moving) and the audience react, as though they were the singer's closest friends. But, for Arnold, in Swift's

case the interaction is obviously fake. There is no material difference between Swift's apparently unforced, unselfconscious chuckle, as she sits at her piano, and the performed fakery of her laugh at the beginning of 'I Did a Bad Thing.' One seems an expression of the singer's unmediated relation to her audience, and the other a purposefully overacted, sarcastic response to the subject of the song, but both are equally mendacious.

Given the relation between Swift and her audience, this is a potentially damning charge. Swift's relation to her fans is famously close; dedicated followers ('Swifties') mine her music, interviews, and media appearances for clues about her life and her wellbeing. Swift's songwriting technique (a mixture of musical styles, from electronica through mainstream pop, rock, and country, with lyrics that are both precise and teasingly allusive) encourages this kind of investment. There are several different versions of Swift for fans to choose, and there are hidden references in the songs that invite and reward the inquisitive listener. This complex, allusive network of styles and references, alongside the implied authenticity that comes from Swift's background in country music, has helped her to sustain an extremely successful career:

As a pop icon, Taylor Swift is a lot of things to an awful lot of people: for her tens of millions of fans and social media followers she is an artist, a celebrity and, perhaps most importantly, she is one of them—someone who has grown up with them, and someone whose most personal reflections in song seem to reflect their own lives. Within the music industries, Swift is regarded as not only a highly successful artist but as an emblematic figure whose very success validates the potential of old industry structures to both challenge and adapt to the demands of a new economic environment. Indeed, she has been described within the industry as nothing less than 'a

phenomenon’: a talented, award winning singer-songwriter who has sold millions of physical CDs (at a time when the CD has been declared dead), one of the most successful touring artists of the early twenty-first century, an outspoken advocate for artists’ rights, and a savvy businesswoman who has turned her talent and her celebrity into a multi-million dollar brand. Her status in the music industry was perhaps most emphatically summed up on the 17–23 November 2014 cover of Bloomberg Businessweek: ‘Taylor Swift Is the Music Industry.’ (Emphasis in the original)²⁸

But by the time that Swift came to release *reputation* in 2017, her undoubted importance to the wider music industry had brought with it the kind of unwelcome attention that has tended to attach itself to young female artists. Her relationships were subjected to media scrutiny; disagreements with other prominent artists and celebrities (Kim Kardashian, Katy Perry, and Kanye West) were amplified into full-scale feuds; and Swift’s reluctance to engage in debates around the social and political issues of the early 21st century meant that the various mediated narratives about her multiplied.²⁹ The *reputation* album and media campaign was, or was at least read as, Swift’s attempt to wrest control of the narrative of her identity from the various discourses that had come to define her. Before the album’s release, Swift’s websites and social media accounts were cleared, to be replaced in the first instance with the glitching image of a snake: the album’s lead single, ‘Look What You Made Me Do,’ seemed a direct riposte to her various critics.

However, for a musician in Swift’s position, wresting control of the images that have come to constitute a star identity isn’t a straightforward operation. Like other popular artists, she is at the centre of competing mediated narratives. As Richard Dyer pointed out in his seminal work on

stardom,³⁰ the star is produced by the cultural information that surrounds them, and there are no guarantees that the image created by that information bear any relation to the star's pre-fame self. For a female artist who, like Swift, has abruptly transitioned from one genre identity to a number of others, the cultural narratives are distinctly less forgiving than they are for male artists. The female pop star, in particular, is more likely to be seen as shaped by generic constraints, rather than (as would be the case for Damon Albarn, who famously disparaged Swift's compositional talents) as someone in clear, conscious control of their output. For example, this review, of a 2011 gig in London, trades on the image of Swift as instinctive and oddly passive:

The 90-minute show falls prey to some arena-rock stand-bys such as the hacky, soft-rock guitar solo that buys time for a costume change and the self-aggrandising video montage of award show triumphs, in which the “little old me?” face makes several appearances. But like the most instinctive pop stars and politicians, Swift has the ability to flirt with 20,000 people at once, and so likably that you can forgive the occasional bit of shtick.³¹

In the midst of the overdetermined event, we have an artist who is ‘instinctive,’ who flirts with the audience instead of addressing them honestly, and who defaults to performative self-depreciation. Even when the genres switch (as Swift moves from country and rock to RnB, electronica, and dance) the shifts have been read as an exercise in canny marketing, rather than as an aesthetic choice:

Swift's *Reputation* tour, her last stadium tour before the COVID-19 pandemic, was the highest grossing of 2018, and epitomised a hybrid,

new/old America: more self-assured, selling the spectacle of a woman pop star-millionaire done wrong and now gone bad (yet without the requisite self-sexualization of so many of her peers).³²

And what sells the spectacle are the mediations Arnold describes above: mediations that are, for Arnold, irredeemably fake.

There are, though, other ways to read the event, however. For example, one might say that the organisation and marketing of the tour was itself a sign of Swift's agency:

In an entrepreneurial move that was described as 'gutsy', Swift partnered with Ticketmaster for her next tour, the reputation Stadium Tour, in 2018. The partnership involved an experiment with Ticketmaster's new 'Verified Fan' platform (an algorithm that would identify real fans vs. scalpers) and a system of dynamic pricing that would increase the price of tickets over time while holding back a certain percentage of sales right up until the night of the show; the strategy was risky in that it defied the older 'sold-out' logic of concert promotion, making the tour look, in its early days at least, like a failure. The result of the experiment, however, was a reduction in the number of tickets available from scalpers to a tiny fraction of that of the previous tour, and an increase in Swift's own take of the sales: approximately \$1.4 m in additional income per show, or \$50 m for the tour overall, even though many seats remained unfilled in each venue. The tour broke Swift's own records for highest-grossing tour, and the dynamic-pricing part of her strategy was later adopted by Beyoncé and Jay-Z.³³

Although this control has to operate within the neoliberal structures of the market (and its success is in itself an exemplar of the power of market dominance) it does, at least, place Swift herself at the centre of the process.³⁴ It could also be argued that the elaborate nature of the event is itself something more than the exercise in technologised fakery that Arnold describes above. Granted, the staging is as scenographically complex as any 21st century stadium tour. It comprises three stage areas (a main, X-shaped stage, behind which are two sets of IMAG screens, angled away from each other, and two smaller stages at the other end of the stadium), and displays the kind of spectacular flexibility required to fill the space. The screens behind the main stage can be moved up and down, to reveal the band and a platform for Swift (towards the end of the show, performers abseil down from the top of the screens). Giant snakes rear up over the smaller stages, and an animated gold snake strikes out at the dancers during ‘Look What You Made Me Do’ (as a massive cobra head appears in the gap between the IMAG screens). During ‘Delicate,’ Swift travels from the main stage to one of the smaller stages in an open half-globe threaded with fairy lights; during ‘Bad Blood,’ she travels from the other small stage back to the main stage, this time in the skeleton of a snake. These and other moments of spectacle are for effect, but not only for effect. The technology employed in the event is always placed at the service of an implicit narrative, shared and performed by Swift and her fans.

This narrative is, of course, heavily mediated, but this does not of itself mean that it is fake. Rather, Swift and her fans make similar use of the narratives created both by the technology and by the general design of the space. Throughout the performance, the evolving technologies allow Swift both to inhabit and to step away from the narratives that surround her. At the start of the gig, she enters the main stage, in black, and performs ‘Are

You Ready For It’ against a dark set with red highlights, the very incarnation of the singer as bad girl; on first of the smaller stages, in a multicoloured dress, under bright lights, she sings ‘Shake It Off,’ in the midst of a troupe of similarly multicoloured dancers. ‘Bad Blood’ carries her back to a main stage lit in blood red; ‘Getaway Car’ is performed against a scrolling film of the desert, lyrics from the song marked out on the landscape. The stage, when it transforms, transforms into the appropriate shape for the song; and because the songs (both Swift and her audience insist) are linked to the ongoing narrative of her life, the stage can’t help but reflect that narrative on a grand, stadium-filling scale (for more on the relation between narrative and performance, see [Chapter 6](#)).

The audience’s response to this is generally strong (a response conformed by YouTube footage of the tour). It stands as an example of what Nicholle Lamerichs would term affective fandom: a type of response predicated on knowledge and ownership of the main narratives that coalesce around the star. These include the mediated narratives that surround her, and the narratives Swift or the star text surrounding her creates; they also include the narratives created by and between the fans themselves:

Ultimately, affect helps construct the identity of the fan, which is grounded in an emotional ownership of media content. This emotional ownership is achieved through creative practices, the purchase of objects or memorabilia, and the establishment of social bounds with like-minded individuals. Alignment with the media text is a purposeful and reflexive activity because fans consciously reiterate their feelings toward the source text.^{[35](#)}

Swift shows herself aware of the need to foster this emotional involvement. In a long monologue before ‘All Too Well’ (originally released on *Red* in

2012), she tells the audience that some of the tracks on the tour are there because they requested that she revisit her older work. Moreover, she tells them she is continually delighted by the fact that her devoted audience have reshaped her songs:

I know from our conversations that you guys are so all about lyrics and all about a feeling, and all about, if whatever it is that the person you listen to is singing about what you happen to be going through or did go through at one point in time, I – I think that’s kind of all you care about when it comes to a song.³⁶

She writes, she says, to ‘try to get past something’;³⁷ but this particular song, of all the songs she has written, is the one that has been taken up by her fans and incorporated into their lives, as diary entries, as tattoos, as lyrics sung back to her in live performance. In this moment, Swift both claims ownership of the material and stands outside it, acknowledging the affective engagement of the audience. It is her narrative, but it’s theirs too – and both Swift and the audience can acknowledge ownership of the text in performance. As she sings, the close-up image of her face is carried on the main IMAG screens and in other screens positioned so that even the top tiers can see her face. The same technology that performs the mediated narratives that both Swift and the audience share also facilitates these moments of connection, and the moments are themselves too complex to be summarised as fake, even though (or, in fact, precisely because) they are mediated. The technologies employed during the show stage the mediations that have shaped Swift’s image, and they allow Swift to perform as though she could step outside of those mediations.

It could be argued, of course, that this is impossible; that performance itself is mediation; but the mediation isn’t necessarily fixed or controlled by

anyone. Swift's team might have worked carefully through each staging moment, but the interpretation of those moments is something that Swift invites the audience to share. However, it is also possible to see this, not as a limitation on the power of the star, but as the sign of a productive relation between star and fan. Celebrity narratives are jointly determined; they are not owned by any of the groups, organisations, or individuals whose inputs feed the story.³⁸ Even in the largest of venues, technology has to facilitate the idea that the event is communally authored, by the star and by the faithful people who have come to see them. This authorship is made possible by the technology; it creates monumental scenographic effects during the show, and it also serves to create moments of intimacy. One of those moments is described above, and it is a standard part of most large-scale performances – the singer with the single, acoustic instrument, apparently performing directly to the audience (such moments, of course, rely on technologies which might be less overtly performative, but which are themselves complex). Another comes before Swift sings 'Delicate.' She tells the audience that they were given wristbands that light up as she speaks:

The reason why I wanted to have these on the tour is because this is actually my very first all-stadium tour, which ... which has been so, so much fun because of you. Um... So, one thing I do know about stadiums is that they're just ... massive places to play, and so I wanted to make sure that no matter what, I could see every single one of you in these stadiums. So, if you're on the (loud cheering) top, top deck, last row, and you think I can't see you, that would be incorrect.³⁹

One would guess that the fan on the top deck in the last row might understand that this is at best a polite fiction; but in the moment of the

performance, it works, because it creates a visual correlative for the fairy lights adorning the platform that carries Swift from the main stage across the stadium. It places her and the audience in the same space, giving them, momentarily, joint technological responsibility for the event, and the sense that, in varying ways, they exercise at least a small measure of control over the performance, and hence over the developing narrative of Swift's celebrity. As in the previous two cases, technology enables place orientation; in this case, both star and audience are placed slightly outside of the narrative of Swift as celebrity – and afforded somewhere to meet each other.

Conclusion

As noted in [Chapter 2](#), scenographic technologies in live performance evolved because of a number of overriding imperatives. Firstly, performance spaces got bigger; secondly, touring networks developed; and thirdly, audiences needed to be brought closer to the event. However, the scenographic techniques used in theatre and performance venues in the 1960s had to be retooled, to make sure that they were expressive enough, flexible enough (and, given the rigours of touring, reliable enough) to work successfully in the spaces bands and artists found themselves playing. However, as the practices of touring developed, the practical necessities of ensuring standardised lighting and sound were incorporated into another, overarching imperative. Music fandom is predicated both on visual and musical information; it is also nurtured and sustained by all of the information to which the audience has access. Bands and artists in performance didn't simply play music. When they toured, they brought with them their equipment and their crews, but also all the visual and aural information that the fans had come to associate with the musicians they

went to see. Very quickly, close on the heels of the development of the structures of contemporary touring, musicians and the emerging corporate structures that supported them (the record labels, the venue networks, teams of specialised technicians) began to use technology to create bespoke environments which allowed audiences access, not simply to the event, but to the implied world created by the artist's music and the artist's image.

All of the three examples in this chapter demonstrate this, in various ways; technology, for Kraftwerk's fans, Prince's fans, and Taylor Swift's fans, facilitates the creation of appropriate performance spaces. In Hann's terms, technology in the live event is an exercise in place orientation, but this can properly be understood as more than the simple decking out of a location with the technologies required to make the show run. Audiences are invited in, to Kraftwerk's history, to Prince's identity, and to the stories Swift tells and those that are told about her. Whether it's through a gradually evolving, iconic stage image facilitated by technology, or the seamless integration of new technologies into the event; or the use of technology to both fill the largest spaces and to place the audience in the midst of the artist's unfolding story, technology shapes and guides both the structure of the show and the audience's response to the show. As is the case with Sam Fender, technological shifts both demarcate tracks and sections of the performance, but also cue and shape audience responses. Affectively, they orient the audience towards a particular performance, evolving in a specific place. But the technology does something more. It places both the musicians and the spectators in the midst of the narratives, the images, the associations that the music, the artists, and the audience bring with them to the performance.

Notes

1. Nick Mason's account of touring with Pink Floyd in the 1970s itemises some of the larger problems the band encountered. In particular, syncing the band's music to the film clips used in live performance was always difficult; Mason had to work to a click track, and the film itself was prone to breaking down. [↵](#)
2. <https://www.nme.com/reviews/live/sam-fender-at-glastonbury-2022-indie-master-finally-has-his-moment-3255081> [↵](#)
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzFG-jlxL8A> [↵](#)
4. Hann 2019, p. 41. [↵](#)
5. Hann 2020, p. 31. [↵](#)
6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNoFHdlMrtI> [↵](#)
7. Albiez and Pattie 2011. [↵](#)
8. Tallis 2022, pp. 10–12. [↵](#)
9. Qtd in [Reynolds 2020](#). [↵](#)
10. Perrin 1981. [↵](#)
11. It has become routine, whenever a photograph of politicians at lecterns appears, to find the picture on social media with the tag 'Worst Kraftwerk gig ever.' [↵](#)
12. Prior 2008, pp. 915–16. [↵](#)
13. The term given to the industrial and economic rehabilitation and rapid growth of West Germany after the Second World War. [↵](#)
14. Ramos 2014, p. 431. [↵](#)
15. The Parental Music Resource Centre, a pressure group advocating greater parental control over young people's listening habits, was formed in partial reaction to some of the more sexually direct songs on the Prince album *1999*. [↵](#)
16. Till 2010, p. 70. [↵](#)
17. Till 2010, p. 77. [↵](#)

18. Williams 2017, p. 301. [!\[\]\(140c91371da28e9d2c38ef8cf5b674b4_img.jpg\)](#)
19. Reynolds 2016. [!\[\]\(766df5626e2c9c187ba28e027a1b83c3_img.jpg\)](#)
20. For example, at the end of the first half of the show, Prince performed ‘Anna Stesia’ at the centre of the stage, on a platform that raised both the artist and the keyboard he was playing. [!\[\]\(e2c46089b87a8d8d9e2dcfe7a41e2b50_img.jpg\)](#)
21. For example, the end of ‘Glam Slam’ in the show’s second half is a frenetic, choreographed interaction between Prince, Cat, the bassist, and the guitarist, and it is lit by blue and white spots, against a general blue wash. At the end of the track, Prince and Cat bow to each other in a single blue spot (with smoke accentuating the shape of the beam of light); the stage then darkens, before two spots pick out Prince centre stage, strumming the opening chords of ‘The Cross.’ [!\[\]\(8208fa9f6aba91fb3c8d8e50d6864b17_img.jpg\)](#)
22. Kiss adopted the system after their guitarist Ace Freeley was nearly electrocuted. [!\[\]\(886b41828cb47696620480907cd6203d_img.jpg\)](#)
23. One of the oddly fascinating aspects of watching footage of the Who in the 1960s and 1970s is noting the various ways a hypermobile guitarist like Pete Townsend copes with his guitar cable. [!\[\]\(f02bdd3b46cb37a89c265e5861dae4ee_img.jpg\)](#)
24. Taylor Swift, *reputation* stadium tour. Netflix 2018. [!\[\]\(dde46ccc15d4ea82f80cbc92f9aab298_img.jpg\)](#)
25. Arnold 2021, pp. 32–3. [!\[\]\(55817082ecca1e0c138261da9fd821ec_img.jpg\)](#)
26. See [Waksman 2022](#). [!\[\]\(76efa73d51be5fb93ce93a2a91d96058_img.jpg\)](#)
27. Arnold 2021, pp. 28–9. [!\[\]\(ea67af2fe61cb5d399b0facf03ff1d12_img.jpg\)](#)
28. Théberge 2021, pp. 41–2. [!\[\]\(dd961fc2d8988a4a99ab14e75f285c67_img.jpg\)](#)
29. Some of the narratives were decidedly toxic; for example, Swift’s persona as a white, Christian American woman was co-opted by the alt-right. [!\[\]\(15bbab59f1207e8db966e61dc7cea4dd_img.jpg\)](#)
30. Dyer 1979. [!\[\]\(4509dc42727164a42ef52d80dc4b0305_img.jpg\)](#)
31. Lynskey 2011. [!\[\]\(3b4933347fbef48dba2864c23778b4f9_img.jpg\)](#)
32. Fogarty and Arnold 2021, pp. 1–10, 4. [!\[\]\(e69e329e088eb72bc804b7153fce918a_img.jpg\)](#)

33. Theberge p. 48 (Swift attempted to run this system again in 2022, in prebooking for the *Eras* tour; the demand was so great that the system crashed). [!\[\]\(721f7a5b9476786efc6991bedd01baad_img.jpg\)](#)
34. As did, in their own way, the re-recording of her back catalogue after a long-running dispute with her former manager. [!\[\]\(afc33c43bc08072f46bb621db6f1cf3c_img.jpg\)](#)
35. Lamerichs 2018, p. 19. [!\[\]\(281cc83d9fa2a8ad03d3db1d0d75051c_img.jpg\)](#)
36. Swift, *Reputation* tour. [!\[\]\(db94a3a50d1f7327860f98b8db3f53cd_img.jpg\)](#)
37. Swift, *Reputation* tour. [!\[\]\(fc36b5652c22f9e5808e68b190407bee_img.jpg\)](#)
38. Although this doesn't stop people making the effort, Swift's relationship with Matt Healy enraged a section of her fandom – so much so, that online petitions were raised, requiring the relationship to end. [!\[\]\(19d92355c85ee9d808d910a0d3b11407_img.jpg\)](#)
39. Swift, *Reputation* tour. [!\[\]\(1dbfbdae1bc9a91b383c41511f061a08_img.jpg\)](#)

4

PERFORMANCE AND GENRE

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At the beginning of *In Concert*, Philip Auslander makes an eminently sensible point about popular music genres in performance. Responding to an article by the journalist Megan Evershed, who argued that contemporary artists such as Billie Eilish transcend generic categories (and as such, provided the perfect soundtrack for their Gen Z fanbase), Auslander points out that, in practice, genre categories are themselves always fluid, always subject to transformation, and always liable to overlap with other genres. Moreover, the idea that musicians can somehow transcend genre ignores the way that genre categories operate within popular culture: not as fixed sets of musical and visual codes, but as a kind of lingua franca, providing us with a way of discussing, debating, and sharing our taste in music:

I am not arguing that artists like Nas X and Eilish fit comfortably into genre categories despite the claim that they transcend genre. Like most musicians, they overlap genre categories. My point is that whatever its failings, the language of genre enables us to identify music and, therefore, to talk about it. Eilish may be neither purely alternative nor purely pop, but the fact that these are the two categories that are invoked in talking about her work provides at least a set of rough coordinates to where she resides in the musical universe (a hint

as to her molecular structure as an artist) and a starting point for thinking about what she does and her potential audiences.¹

The example Auslander chooses here is one that should alert us to just how porous genre categories are. There are many ways to be alternative: alternative rock, alternative pop, alternative dance, alternative Hip-hop, alternative reggaeton, alternative country, and so on. Even settling on one of these generic labels provides no certainty. For example, alternative pop, as far as it has a settled meaning, suggests pop music made by those who might be deemed more artistically credible than the normal run of pop performers (so the label might fit someone like Lana Del Rey or Lorde; or, perhaps, depending on the standpoint of the person making the argument, Harry Styles). But this begs further questions – how do we define the normal run of pop performers, how do we define pop itself (as a genre or as a metagenre, underneath which a bewilderingly complex network of generic strands are gathered), and so on, and so on; and this is before we begin to examine the relation between pop and the other musical genres it intersects with or adopts. Trying to find the precise definition of any musical genre inevitably comes to feel very much like chasing an infinite number of rabbits down an ever-expanding network of rabbit holes.²

As Fabian Holt has famously argued, genres operate in popular music as systems of classification; they allow us to identify and claim relation to the music that we listen to. Genre labels, however, do not simply attach themselves to particular musical styles. For Holt, (in what has become one of the canonical discussions of genre formation in music), genres are frequently born and develop in the midst of cultural debate:

Struggles about names and definitions are often an integral part of the histories of individual musics and their cultural dynamics. Why do

people have different names for the same music? What happened when ‘hillbilly music’ became ‘country music,’ when jazz was defined as art music, and when zydeco was presented as world music? Did such changes in nomenclature create or reflect musical changes? Why have people debated whether salsa is a distinct genre or nothing more than Cuban music in new clothes? Who fought the battles, where, and what were the stakes?³

In other words, it is not simply that the rough definitions provided by current genre classifications are useful without suggesting that there is anything fixed and essential in the music itself; it is that this has always been the case. As Toynbee pointed out in 2000, genre formation is, and always has been, an exercise in social construction; even at times when the boundaries between genres might seem to have become rather more porous, the social need to assign and employ generic categories remains strong – because it is itself a crucial part of the way in which we assimilate musical forms. This, though, displaces the implicit question posed by Auslander, rather than answering it. If generic definitions are always to an extent in flux, why are fans, critics, and musicians so certain that they share any common generic definitions at all?

A useful answer to this (put forward by Silver, Lee, and Childress in 2016) is to think of genres as a network of interlocking systems, some relatively discrete, some more diffuse:

Yet there need not be one monolithic pattern describing the current state of genre boundaries in the overall system of popular music. Some regions within that system may have weak boundaries, others strong; some may be highly differentiated, others relatively undifferentiated. Any given genre is part of a larger complex or world... These worlds

exert distinctive types of normative pressures, which have implications for how musicians are expected to relate to genre boundaries. Thus, genres likely exhibit different structural tendencies, depending on how they coalesce into larger complexes. For instance, some complexes may promote sub-cultural identity and novel mixing while others may encourage integration, expansion, and commonality.⁴

On the one hand, some genres might appear more coherent than others, not because they come closer to the essential truth of what a musical genre is, but because the systems within which they have evolved promote both a type of music and a type of allegiance that, taken together, gives the genre a clear, if not entirely consistent, identity. On the other hand, genre labels are applied to complex musical and cultural systems that have little apparent coherence. Britpop, for example, can only be defined in the loosest possible terms (music produced by guitar groups in the UK from roughly 1992 to roughly 1997); and Trap – which has proved an extremely influential subgenre of Hip-hop – is given what generic coherence it possesses through the incorporation of a number of rhythmic features (not all of which have to be present).⁵ In discussing genre in popular music, therefore, we soon find ourselves discussing, not hard and fast musical rules, but networks of interacting musical and cultural information. Musicians, too, operate in a performative environment in which genre systems can be as tight, or as loose, as all-inclusive, or as porous as their audiences will accept. When we come to look at the operation of genre in live performance, we can see those complex systems given physical shape and expression – but this does not mean that generic systems provide a fixed template that governs all the interactions between artists and audiences.

To take a specific, recent example: Alex Turner, in interviews promoting Arctic Monkeys' 2022 album *The Car*, showed himself keenly aware of just

how malleable genre systems could be:

“Rather than strings on top of rock,” he says finally, “I was interested in switching the ‘rock band’ bit on and off.” He tweaks levels on a mixing desk in his mind’s eye. “With the Sculptures song” – the dizzyingly gorgeous ‘Sculptures of Anything Goes’ – “the ‘rock band’ fader comes up for two bars here and there, and then it’s switched back off.”⁶

The idea that genre is a switch the artist can flip would not apply to all performances. It is hard to imagine BTS launching into Death Metal (although, given K-pop’s musical complexity, by no means impossible). In practice, though, the fact that genre systems are loose gives performers like Turner an amount of bounded freedom. As long as any generic shifts are part of the history shared by artist and audience, they can be accommodated within the performance. In the case of Arctic Monkeys, this shift – ‘switching the rock band off,’ as Turner puts it – was already part of the band’s and Turner’s history. Their first albums – *Whatever I Say I Am*, *That’s What I’m Not*, and *Favourite Worst Nightmare* – blended indie and punk, but from their third album (*Humbug*) onwards the band’s template widened, to embrace rock, psychedelia, 1960s pop, and lounge music (these last two styles pursued by Turner on his side project, *The Last Shadow Puppets*). The audience coming to see the band live in 2023 would, it is fair to assume, have at least a passing familiarity with the various styles Arctic Monkeys had embraced in their career. In performance, generic shifts were signalled by and triggered shifts in performance style. For example, at the beginning of ‘There’d Better Be a Mirrorball,’ in Paris on the 10th May 2023, Turner sits at a piano next to the drums, playing the song’s introductory phrase. He rises and walks down centre stage, then turns with

his back to the audience, conducting the band through the sequence of stabbing chords that lead into the first verse. Those completed, he turns to the mic and starts to sing. His demeanour through this sequence is inescapably that of a world-weary French chansonnier, in the lineage of Brel and Serge Gainsbourg. The song completed, a roadie hands him an electric guitar, and when '505' starts he has shifted into indie mode, standing face on to the mic. Later, the band, reduced to the four original members, play 'I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor,' and Turner adopts the archetypal stance of a rock frontperson, his foot up on the monitors. These performative shifts are not radical (no change of costume or hairstyle is required), but in each case Turner's performance subtly mirrors the genre of the track.

The various generic shifts, both in the music and in Turner's performance, are framed against a set that is, one might say, generically indicative rather than one which could only be associated with one style of music. The back wall is hung with full-length drapes; between them and the drums hangs a large, circular screen with a broad, white border that lights up at key moments in the performance. Flanking the screen in the band's arena gigs are two rectangular lighting panels.⁷ The set is symmetrical, balanced, and restrained; it would equally suit an indie band like Arcade Fire or a torch singer like Amy Winehouse. In Hann's terms (discussed above), the set is scenographic, in that it performs in a fashion that is, in this case, generically appropriate, but it does not simply perform one genre. For the brooding rock track 'Crying Lighting,' the band are lit by stark white side lights; as the song builds to its chorus the stage is bathed in red. In contrast, at the beginning of 'Mirrorball,' the drapes are fully illuminated, and their image is projected on the circular screen – for a moment echoing a key image from David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks*. In both cases,

the design and lighting shape themselves to the appropriate musical style; in both cases, the interaction between music, performance, and mise-en-scène demonstrates that when we discuss genre, what we are in fact discussing are the scenographic and performative ways in which the various systems that create meaning in music intersect.

When, therefore, we discuss genre's role in live performance, we are not simply dealing with a simple chain of connection, from music to performance style to mise-en-scène and to reception. Rather, genre categories act as organising systems that structure the event, sometimes tightly, sometimes loosely, sometimes forming internally coherent events, sometimes blending elements from other, related generic systems. Genres also evolve through a complex interaction with their own history, the development of related and competing genres, and the wider evolution of the popular cultural forms to which the genre is allied. This means that generic systems can change markedly through time (RnB now is identifiably in a lineage that stretches back to the 1940s, but SZA neither sounds nor performs like Little Richard) but will still manage to retain enough coherence, either because of a traceable history, or because of an implied relation to the wider culture, or because of a relation to an audience, for the generic term to retain at least some descriptive use. In what follows, I will examine the ways in which the various systems of meaning that are inherently part of generic classification interact in performance and how they contribute to the performance, design, and reception of the music and the artists.

Metal: Welcome to Hell

The 80s had barely begun when a menacing shadow with burning eyes startled an anonymous rocker in a London backstreet. With the *Running Free* sleeve, 22-year-old artist Derek Riggs gave us a powerfully visual sense of location to Iron Maiden's world, and a literal icon of metal lying in wait. Our first full-facial eyeful of Eddie came in April 1980 on the eponymous debut, a snarling punkish ghoul staring out the onlooker with malicious intent (digitally reworked for a 1998 reissue to look darker and uglier).⁸

And in the promotional video for Iron Maiden's 2023 *The Future Past* tour, Eddie is still there: no longer an emaciated, flayed street punk, but a composite cyborg samurai with fanged teeth and red, glowing eyes. Over the years, Eddie has come attired in a variety of guises – straitjacketed and lobotomised, as an alien invader, as Death in a black cowl and hood, as an Egyptian mummy, as a prisoner on the electric chair, as a pirate, or a skeletal torso and head (with a writhing ghost in his outstretched hand, and fire shooting from his broken skull), or as the Devil himself, rising monumentally into view at the back of the stage. At the time of writing the tour has yet to begin, but one can guess that, when it does, Eddie will manifest himself, looking much as he does in the promo. He might be giant, with only his head and hands visible; he might stalk on to the stage; his image might be carried on the backdrop; but Eddie will be there. It simply would not be an Iron Maiden gig without him. As the band and its fans know, Eddie is indispensable because he fulfils a number of functions in the iconography surrounding the band. He is both a reassuringly familiar presence and a visible symbol of a particular album or the theme of a tour; and to the fans (memorably described as a Global tribe by Jean-Philippe Ury-Petes⁹) a link to the band's history and a sign of the band's continued

vitality. The musicians might be ageing; Bruce Dickinson, the lead singer, might not be as limber as he once was; but the undead Eddie lives.

Eddie, then, fulfils an important role in both the recorded and the live output of a band that has been in existence, in 2023, for 48 years. He also fulfils another, unmissably obvious function; his various appearances place an appropriately generic performative and scenographic frame over a style of music that is itself generically distinct. Metal has, as commentators have noted, a series of characteristic, evolving sonic templates; it also fosters a strong sense of community;¹⁰ displays a complex relation to masculinity and to gender identity in general;¹¹ and demonstrates a strong investment in the popular cultural tropes drawn from particular historical or mythical narratives.¹² It also, as will be readily apparent to anyone with even the most passing acquaintance with the genre, has a long-standing relation to horror texts, whether literary, visual, or cinematic. This relation has been there since the genre's inception. Not only does the title track of Black Sabbath's first, eponymous album describe a satanic visitation, the album cover itself could be a still from a mid-1960s Hammer film, or, at a stretch, an early entry in the Folk Horror subgenre (*Witchfinder General*, a key text in the formation of the genre, was released in 1968 – a year before Sabbath's debut). In the 2020s, for both the musicians and the fans, the link is still there. Tobias Forge, lead singer of the Swedish Metal band Ghost, was very clear on the subject, when interviewed by the *NME* in 2023:

How are rock and metal similar to horror? Considering the current state of music and film, Forge said the “stigma” still attached to rock is akin to horror movies being overlooked for Academy Awards.

“You have these blockbuster horror films that would never, ever be considered for an Oscar because it's a horror film, so it's automatically

seen as not that good,” he relayed. “That might change in time, but that is the stigma that metal and rock still have.”¹³

Forge makes the connection between Metal and horror in a fashion that would be entirely familiar to its fans and those who analyse the genre. Metal, from its inception, has been regarded, and has come to regard itself, as an outsider genre, in which bands and audiences frequently return to the idea that together they form a community of the abject or the disregarded. As [Rowe's \(2018\)](#) interviewees attested, allegiance to the genre gives committed fans a means through which their outsider status can become a source of pride and validation.¹⁴ They prized the music for its emotional affect, its frequently raw subject matter, its musical complexity, and its technical control. Moreover, they welcomed and embraced the fact that Metal is a system of genres that lend themselves to performance. There are dress codes (that can be adopted and adapted), there are hairstyles and items of personal adornment, and there are gestures and actions through which the fan's identification with the music can be displayed. In sharp contrast to most other musical subgenres, metal fandom asserts agency through the performance of extremity. Given that Horror, it could be said, is in its turn the popular cultural genre most associated with extremity, abjection, and outsiderdom, it should therefore come as no surprise that, for Metal musicians and fans, it provides a set of ready-made performative templates through which Metal as a genre can reaffirm its communal identity.

As commentators from Deena Weinstein onwards have noted, this means that live performance is at the heart of Metal; a place where the community can be made physically manifest, and a place where the idea of cultural abjection can be both performatively embraced and also exorcised:

The solidarity felt by all at a concert results from the expression of all of the values of metal and the maximization of interaction and identification with one another. One has a sense of being at one with the metal community while also feeling fully oneself; the strong emotions of pleasure can be freely expressed and there is no alienation, rather there is the feeling of being accepted. If the ideal metal community is enacted at a concert, the venue itself forms the spatial and temporal boundaries of the experience, and when the concert is over and all have departed, the temporary community no longer exists.¹⁵

For Weinstein, the idea of an ideal metal community operates as a kind of defining myth for fans, even for those whose allegiance to metal genes has weakened over time. Weinstein argues that these fans are part of a ‘diminished community,’ more diffuse but still motivated by the idea of perfect communion both with other fans and with musicians (Weinstein calls this a ‘mythical’ community). However, the nature of that community, whether ideal or diffuse, and the system of Metal subgenres that sustain it, changes through time. As I’ve previously noted, changes in the configuration of gigs have affected artists across a number of genres, but for styles like Metal that have a strong evolving visual identity, the configuration of the stage will tend to conform to the images that already shape the audience’s expectations of the genre and the event. However, these expectations might be structured, but they are not fixed. For example, changes in both the iconography of Metal as a genre and the staging of the live event loosely track the evolution of horror in popular culture, and also the development of staging technologies that facilitate community.

These systems took a while to establish themselves. In its earliest incarnation, Metal was itself part of a wider generic system and did not

have as clearly defined an identity as it took on from the 1980s onwards. However, there were early signs that Horror would provide bands and artists with key iconographic images. The front cover of Black Sabbath's debut album could, as noted above, have been a still from a contemporary folk horror movie.¹⁶ More significantly, artists whose work intersected with the developing genre introduced explicitly extreme staging techniques into their performances: Alice Cooper (see [Chapter 2](#)) borrowed a repertoire of shock effects from 1930s Universal horror and from *Grand Guignol*, and Kiss incorporated cartoonish make-up, pyrotechnics, fire, and blood. As Metal itself began to develop its own generic systems, these two elements – the overtly horrific and the theatrically excessive – provided musicians with a means both of capturing developing themes in the music and of marking themselves off as different. Judas Priest's early releases demonstrate this shift. Their first album cover, for *Rocka Rolla* (1974), is a close-up of a bottle cap, with the album's title picked out in an approximation of the Coca-Cola font. Their second album cover, *Sad Wings of Destiny* (1976), pitches the band head-first into a recognisably Metal visual universe: an angel, fallen into Hell, sinks into lava as flames gout up behind him – and to his right, a human skull lies disregarded on the ground. Priest's live staging followed a similar trajectory. In 1975, at the Reading Festival, they are indistinguishable from other hard rock bands: in 1982, filmed in Memphis on an arena tour, they have a full, dramatic light show, dry ice, rows of Marshall amps, catwalks, a band dress code of studded black and red leather, and at the end a backlit motorbike driving out from a cloud of smoke. By the time we reach Montreal in 1984, the 1982 staging has been augmented by a stylised, horned, demonic head – part insect, part goat. Granted, the band's popularity now meant they could afford the trappings of a complex show, but the evolution of Judas Priest's live scenography isn't

simply a matter of the staging growing to fill the space. Rather, the staging grew to fit the genre.

As metal grew in popularity through the 1980s and 1990s, the number of subgenres associated with it proliferated – until by the mid-1990s a style of music that had itself developed as a subgenre of rock was now itself the term given to a complex set of interacting generic systems (Glam Metal, Thrash Metal, Nu Metal, Death Metal, Doom Metal, Industrial Metal, Symphonic Metal, Prog Metal, etc.). In the midst of this generic complexity, horror imagery provided artists and fans with a useful connecting thread, a way of marking out whatever manifestation of Metal the fans experienced as generically authentic. These manifestations could be relatively subtle (backlighting, chiaroscuro, smoke, blood-red pyrotechnics, and fire) or they could be more overt (the employment of religious or sacrilegious imagery, masks, and make-up). Sometimes the references are even more specific. When Corey Taylor, the lead singer of Slipknot, took the stage at Resurrection Fest in 2019 he wore a mask with a distinctive pattern – two grey lines, one down the centre of the mask, one stretching from ear to ear. The reference, for those members of the audience attuned to horror comics, is to the stigma borne by the infected in Garth Ennis' *Crossed* (other masks referenced Pinhead from the *Hellraiser* franchise, and Jason from the *Friday the 13th* films).

It is not that there is a checklist of horror elements that have to be included in every Metal gig; rather, it is that, across all the generic systems that interact with each other to give Metal the loose scenographic and performative coherence it possesses, Horror styles and tropes recur in various combinations. They will either be as overt as Slipknot's masks, or they will be more diffuse (the set for Metallica's 2023 tour was a simple doughnut shape, with a substantial proportion of the audience in the centre

– but the stage still spouted flame, blood-red spots raked the crowd, and video screens showed skeletons in battledress during ‘One’). But whether it is overt or diffuse, the intent is the same. Metal stages defiant, excessive abjection, and, in doing so, habitually it looks to Horror – the popular cultural home of defiant, excessive abjection. Slipknot don horror masks and Resident Evil overalls; Iron Maiden’s Eddie, as noted above, incarnates horror icon after horror icon; King Diamond’s frontman dresses as the barker for a Ray Bradburyesque carnival of terror; Rob Zombie dresses as a decayed, dishevelled backwoods killer straight from the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise; Ghost’s Tobias Forge styles himself Papa Emeritus IV and wear black-and-white make-up that reduces his face to a stylised skull; Slayer’s final tour features inverted crosses, some of which were on fire; Gojira shower sparks on the crowd and shoot flames over their heads. In doing so, they and many other Metal acts certainly play to the genre’s long-standing interest in the excessive, the horrific, the apocalyptic, and the eschatological, but they also proudly display the cultural stigmata Forge identifies as an inescapable part of the history of the music. Accepting the horrifically excessive in performance is a way of reinforcing the idea of Metal bands and artists as members of a community of defiant outsiders. Performing horror tropes in concert allows both bands and fans access to a theatrical world that is, for once, designed to celebrate the subordinate genre they love. The subject matter, the costuming, the volume, and the assaultive, excessive staging might seem like a representation of hell, but it is a hell designed, and treated, as a haven for the self-identified abject.

K-pop: We purple you

The opening moments of BTS’ 2022 Wembley stadium gig operate as a sequence of teasing misdirections. At first, the stage is almost empty, aside

from four shapes and a platform, arranged in the main performance space and shrouded in white (the rest of the stage is black). The covers are removed from the shapes onstage, revealing white Ionic columns; pyrotechnics flare from both sides of the set, but at the moment when one might expect the band to appear, everything goes quiet. Then the music cuts in, white lights stab into the crowd, the pyrotechnics are replaced by jets of flame, and at the back of the set, half-obscured by the lights and the fire, two silver Siberian Tigers (South Korea's national animals) rise to frame the gig's first live performers. But not the band; a troupe of male dancers go through a short routine, before rushing offstage, to reveal, finally, BTS themselves in white, arranged on and behind the platform. However, the crowd haven't had to wait through this elongated opening for their first sighting of their idols. The seven members of the band have already appeared; before anything happens on the stage itself, to the accompaniment of a low, droning bass note, the IMAG screens show images of the singers, framed against backdrops of red, white, and pale blue. Each shot is posed and carefully framed, first in a set of tight head shots, and then in mid-shot, intercut with the band coming together, and then (keyed with the pyrotechnics) in short, intensely coloured bursts of movement, culminating in a shot of the band in the pose they will adopt when they finally appear on stage. There is more to this opening than the usual footage that announces the imminent appearance of the stars in a stadium or arena gig. The screens at the start of the show frame each band member as an object of desire (and in doing so they fulfil the same function as the full-length picture of Beyoncé, at the beginning of the *Renaissance* tour), but they also establish a visual, scenographic language that runs through the length of the performance. Images of the band regularly appear throughout the gig – posed in small groups or framed as individuals,

artistically lit, looking directly into the camera. These images are woven seamlessly into the evolving show; arguably, they contribute just as much to the ‘liveness’ of the event as the physical presence of the performers, because they mirror a key part of the generic interaction between K-pop’s audiences and its stars.

This generic interaction is itself of a particularly immediate kind. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain has pointed out that, through apps such as V Live,¹⁷ K-pop fans could gain access to their idols in a variety of settings – live performance, responding to fan questions, in award shows, and so on. On V Live, all the possible means of performative interaction between fans and artists are available, and this plays a key role in supporting the existence of a famously dedicated fanbase:

The interaction order of V Live is distinguished, in part, by the “liveness” of its online interactions between idol broadcasters and fan viewers. V Live elevates fan comments to “real time” on-screen comments during the stream (much like Facebook Live). K-pop idols on V Live read and respond as viewers are watching, sometimes with subtitles in English. Viewers can also see other fan comments and build on the comments being streamed, (as well as see the level of engagement with a particular band through their Chemi level) as well as the K-pop idol speaking and talking to fans directly in real time.¹⁸

And this, in turn, means that K-pop operates with an idea of live performance as something both central to the genre and diffused through a variety of different media. As Yuan Gong notes in a discussion of K-pop’s audiences in China, the concept of Wutai (which translates as stage, and which indicates the audience’s awareness of the genre as a performance) is central to the appeal of K-pop artists:

...[Wutai] (舞台), which refers to the multimedia stage performances that idol groups provide in music chart shows and live concerts, is the most repeated word in the discussants' reflections on what triggers their interests in K-pop. Wutai's repeated presence in these posts which discuss fan's motivations to consume K-pop indicates that for Chinese fans of K-pop, performances are central. Key to the participants' affection for stage performances is the celebration of K-pop idols as specialized artists who are skilled at delivering "kaleidoscopic" ... performances combining live singing, well-choreographed dancing, and spectacular visuality.¹⁹

The images and interactions facilitated online are a key part of the genre's 'kaleidoscopic' appeal; as with other genres, they create the expectations against which the live event is judged.

As Suk-Young Kim notes (2018), there is something fitting in this. K-pop, as a global phenomenon, is inextricably bound up with online and digital media:

...K-pop's global expansion came, not via live world tours, but via music videos, recorded TV music chart shows, and other media promotions that became wildly popular on YouTube and solidified K-pop's reputation as a form of entertainment that thrived predominantly online. The paradigm shift in music consumption also brought about a change in understanding K-pop not just as a sonic genre but as a multimedia performance with a heavy emphasis on visuals. With this process came the reinvention of K-pop artists, who transformed themselves from mere singers to all-around entertainers whose primary career goal was to gain popularity by excelling in all aspects of media performance...²⁰

It could be said, perhaps, that there is nothing inherently new in this. In the 1950s, performers like Elvis Presley moved from creating music to other media – in Presley’s case, to a parallel career in film. What has changed, however, is the speed with which the different parts of the kaleidoscope can be shaken into different configurations. Social media ensures that images and performances are simultaneously available to engaged fans wherever they are, and that the creation of these images can be directly influenced by those fans in real time – as they communicate with the artists, and as they communicate with each other. The sheer scale of the engagement is staggering; in 2020, K-pop fans generated an estimated 6.7 billion posts on Twitter, with tweets coming in from the US, Brazil, Vietnam, Canada, and the Philippines, as well as from Indonesia, Thailand, and South Korea.²¹ As Kim argues, social media sites have themselves played a key role in changing the structure of K-pop texts:

YouTube’s rise ... coincided with a qualitative shift in K-pop music video contents: if the music videos from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s prioritized a dramatized story line often enacted by professional actors – a narrative form that shared strong affinities with TV dramas – then the videos that emerged after the mid-2000s showcased rising trends that emphasized idols themselves rather than the story line based on lyrics. Much like media art, K-pop music videos in the post-YouTube era featured fragmented visual images designed to optimally showcase idols’ charm: their elaborate dance routine, sensational outfits, and physical beauty.²²

This mode of presentation carries over (as Kim notes) to the scenographic organisation of the live event. As an example: the opening moments of Blackpink’s *Born Pink* world tour are given over to images of the band,

shot in oversaturated colour. The camera catches fragments of the artists – a hand trailing across tropical leaves and framed against intense blue light, lips shot in close-up, the kind of framing one might expect in the opening seconds of a music video. When the group launch into ‘How You Like That,’ the camera cuts quickly between images of the whole group and its individual members. The choreography (which quickly includes a troupe of dancers) is designed to give the camera ample opportunity to capture striking images. At each point, one could say that the performance obeys the logic of a music video. Kim, in 2018, noted that the staging style employed by Blackpink – a flat-floored performance space and prominent video screens replicating and extending the live action – is a standard feature of K-pop performance (this account is of a BIGBANG gig):

These filmic intermissions embedded in a live performance serve as seamless bridges between recorded and live by establishing visual continuity between screen and stage. Whereas “Fantastic Baby” featured a transition from music video to live stage, one of the videos played during the concert showed all five members of BIGBANG wearing the same suits that they were wearing on the opening stage of this live concert. While the persistent entanglement of live and digital was reaffirmed, it is noteworthy that these videos had not previously been seen in full in the tour trailer made available online, thereby adding a dimension of a film premiere to a live music concert. Film clips featuring individual members and the entire group, in their complete form, were seen by a live audience, who had been given the opportunity to see only the significantly shorter version of the trailer online prior to the concert. This, in a way, is similar to how a film is released in a movie theater for a live audience.^{[23](#)}

From this, it might sound as though K-pop gigs are exercises in the parasocial (that is, a social relation which seems based on mutuality, but which in fact only runs in one direction – from the fan, to the apparently accessible but in reality remote artist). They are certainly constructed according to an aesthetic familiar to the fans, one that transfers the visual and performative logic of the artist's social media presence to the stage. Aside from the band there are no musicians on the main stage area; the performance space itself is comprised of level platforms, with no fixed pieces of stage furniture to impede the view of the camera or the audience; the catwalk and the B-stages tend to be large and as flat as the main stage. The performance space, in other words, is as scenographically blank and as structurally simple as possible. It can therefore be transformed quickly; changes in lighting, in costuming, in the images carried on the screens, and in the colour of the LEDs in the audience²⁴ are enough to suggest a shifting environment for each new track or section of the show. The crowd might feel as though they are intimately bound up in the performance, but they are simply part of the overall design, their ubiquitous LED light up sticks cued and triggered by a preset lighting plan.

However, to argue this would be to ignore just how powerful the K-pop fanbase is, both within the genre and within the event. For one thing, these performances are sited within a genre whose fans famously are as adept at utilising social media as the artists or the K-pop industry. Michelle Cho makes the point that K-pop fandom is inherently participatory, and that participation operates in the same digital spaces as the music itself. She argues that, in K-pop, models of fandom that are based on the idea of a hierarchy (with the artist as active, and the audience as passive) don't really work. The fanbase creates its own content, and sharing that content is crucial to their participation in the genre:

K-pop fandom models reactivity as the operative form of participation as social behavior – the act of responding to a prompt to create a relay of reactions that constitute collective identity. In terms of civic participation, there are also usually prompts for the subject's participatory reaction. This goes far beyond interpellation as the subject's reaction to the hailing call of the law, but could give us a new way of thinking about participation as primarily spurred by lateral relations. Rather than defining participation as 'taking part' in or 'being part' of the social body as determined by hierarchical social organisation, K-pop's participatory condition allows us to think about the way that normative horizons emerge in relation to collective identities based on shared delight.^{[25](#)}

As Cho makes clear, K-pop's participatory culture is predicated as much on non-hierarchical interactions between fans as it is in the parasocial interactions (through channels such as V Live and Weverse) between fans and artists. Again, there is much in this that would be familiar to previous generations of fans; there has always been an element of participatory interaction in fandoms of all kinds. Social media, though, both scales and speeds up these interactions, enabling fans to create and participate in events, and to share their responses to other fans' participation, in close to real time. And whereas the same process drives fan interactions with other artists and bands (Taylor Swift being a prime example), for K-pop social media is a key constituent element of the genre.

This has an obvious impact on the aesthetic of the performances. For example, at Wembley in 2022, BTS end their performance of 'You Got the Best of Me' on a platform that sinks down into the B-stage. The screens switch on, but rather than a set of dramatically posed shots of BTS, of the kind that introduced the band, we have a rather more intimate sequence,

with band members caught in a succession of private moments – lounging on a sofa, stretching in front of a window, using a bed as a trampoline, sitting on a window frame, passing an orange back and forth. The sequence is shot in slow motion, with the camera lingering on close-ups of the artists' faces. The framing, and the informality of the artists' poses and expressions, echoes the kind of informal interactions between fans and artists online. It is not that the sequence replicates images that might have appeared on V Live before it closed; it is that the shots seem to give the fans privileged access to the artists when they are simply, and decorously, being themselves. The shots are designed to communicate a direct connection between the fans and the band, as though, after the overtly staged and poised opening of the gig, the band can now trust the audience enough to drop their guard; effectively, to be themselves.

As Suk-Young Kim and Youngdae Kim argue, these interactions are important, because they help create the impression that the band are, in such moments, being authentic – which in this case means being true to the image they present through all the media the fans consume. They also suggest something about the relation between K-pop artists and their fanbase:

As many cultural critics note, the future of the music industry depends on how successfully it can build fandom. In this regard, K-pop has an unparalleled culture of catering to fans. When it comes to communicating with fandom and understanding the fans' desire, it has long surpassed the teen pop industry in the United States. Korea has dominated the teen pop genre – mainly idol music geared to young fans – across the globe by the sheer visibility of their fandom in social media spaces, providing an incentive for US labels to forge partnerships with K-pop companies.^{[26](#)}

BTS' fanbase (the A.R.M.Y.) is famously large and organised. The name itself stands for Adorable Representative MC for Youth; according to the BTS wiki, 'BTS and A.R.M.Y. are almost mirrored images of each other and they have a relationship that is affected by each other.'²⁷ Other K-pop bands have dedicated fanbases (Blackpink has BLINK, BIGBANG have VIP, TWICE have ONCE), and there are well-documented feuds between the fans, conducted, as one might expect, both online and in person.²⁸ A.R.M.Y.'s activities stretch beyond fandom – as well as disseminating information about the band (which can involve translating interviews and reports from Korean into various languages), it has launched the *Love Myself* anti-violence campaign (alongside UNICEF), raised money for orphanages who had to isolate during the COVID-19 pandemic, donated \$1 million to the Black Lives Matter campaign. Other interventions have been more directly political. BTS fans flooded the Twitter hashtag #WhiteLivesMatter with clips of K-pop artists and anti-racist messages, and block-booked, but did not use, tickets for a Donald Trump rally in Tulsa in 2020,²⁹ leaving the venue conspicuously empty. Erika Overton, one of the founder members of OIAA (One In An Army- an organisation, formed by BTS fans, that collaborates with non-profit organisations), has argued that such activities are conducted in the spirit of the band:

“The music and the spirit of the guys is at the core and the inspiration for all of it,” Overton says. She references RM's often-quoted comments from a concert: “If your pain is 100 in a scale of 100, if we can lessen that to 99, 98 or 97,” then “the value of our existence is enough.”³⁰

This is a fanbase that does not conform to the commonsensical idea of fandom as a hierarchy, with the powerful artist leading the passive,

powerless fans. This is a fanbase whose impact is felt beyond the genre, and as such, it is a fanbase that requires a nuanced engagement on the part of the artists.

In performance, the relation between BTS and their audience plays out as a reflection and extension of the relation worked out through social media. At Wembley in 2022, we have moments that are statutory in boy and girlband gigs (the tightly choreographed routines, the costume changes, and the smaller, more intimate songs), but, as noted above, the presentation mimics the band's social media presence. The band, in other words, acknowledge the nature of their interaction with their fanbase – and they also acknowledge the strength and collective nature of that fanbase. At the end of the performance, BTS break into the flow of tracks chosen for the encore to speak directly (as much as is possible, given the obvious constraints imposed by the sheer size of the venue) to their fans. Normally, encores are tightly sequenced runs through some of the artist's most popular tracks. Between 'Make it Right' and 'Mikrocosmos,' however, BTS take more than 15 minutes to interact with their audience. Each band member in turn thanks the fans, and acknowledges the status of the crowd as an (implied) entity, whether that is through reading messages the fans have brought (messages that reflect on the unity of artist and audience; one sign reads 'When the times are hard, look at the road we walked together' – a slogan from BTS' 2019 world tour), acknowledging the audience's power ('we could stand here because of you'), or by organising moments of concerted action (getting the crowd to raise and lower their light sticks – batons with spherical lights, known as A.R.M.Y. bombs – in sequence). Throughout this long section, the band, speaking in turn, consistently address the audience as 'A.R.M.Y.'

When Taehyung takes his turn, he tells the crowd ‘I love you’ – and then, throwing an arm wide, he says ‘we purple you.’ This phrase is, as both band and fans know, code for the relation between BTS and the A.R.M.Y.:

Kim Taehyung, one of the singers in the seven-man band, first coined the phrase during the group’s 3rd Muster—a fan club event—back in November 2016. Before wrapping up their performance, Taehyung told fans, “I purple you,” just as the lighting shaded the crowd in rays of purple light.

Taehyung, whose stage name is V, explained the color purple was a hue of love. “Do you know what purple means? Purple is the last color of the rainbow. Purple means I will trust and love you for a long time. I just made it up,” he said.^{[31](#)}

At Wembley, as at the 3rd Muster, the stage is also bathed in purple light, and the A.R.M.Y.’s light sticks too glow purple. At moments like this, the relation between the band’s social media presence (and the fans’ knowledge and understanding of that presence) blends with the spontaneity of the live event. It is not that Taehyung is simply parroting a phrase because he knows that the A.R.M.Y. want to hear it. He is sharing a private moment with them and also (as the show was carried on V Live) reconfirming the information already available for other fans around the world. At this point, the digital parasocial relation between band and fans blurs into the live, social relation between band and audience. The moment suggests to the fans (all included in the A.R.M.Y. for the evening, whether or not they regard themselves as active members) that the band is aware of their power within the event, but it could be argued that everything within the design of the performance has the same implicit message. The video inserts, the choreography, the staging, and the moments of direct communication are all there, as Kim notes, to

replicate the interactions between the band and a particularly organised, active, and dynamic fan base – a relation that is a key constituent part of the genre, played out in scenographically appropriate performances that are themselves designed to be relayed across the world.

Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, genre definitions are by their nature slippery. Rather than conforming to sets of rules, genres exist at the intersection of a number of systems – the history of a particular musical style (and its interaction with other musical styles), the variations developed by musicians, scenes, and geographical locations, the interaction between the genre and the contexts that surround it, the fans' awareness of all of the above, and so on. None of these systems are fixed; all vary; and all work to both shape and change the genre in what can seem surprising ways (the various mutations of Hip-hop, for example). At the same time, the systems are bounded, even if those boundaries are in practice porous, and even if the nature of the boundaries is open to renegotiation. Both Metal and K-pop are as hybrid as any other genre classification, and as apt to evolve over time. Metal has embraced elements of progressive rock, hard rock, industrial music, rap, electronica, and punk without losing generic coherence; K-pop blends rap, RnB, soul, jazz, gospel, reggae, electronica, Western classical, Korean musical styles, and pop, to produce music its fans recognise as authentically part of the style.

Live performance, as I've argued above (see [Chapter 1](#)), operates as a system of overlapping frames, which allow both musicians and audiences to orient themselves appropriately within the event. Genre – the loose system of musical categorisation that marks one musical style off from another – is arguably one of the most important of those frames. In both Metal and K-

pop, for example, live shows are designed to confirm to the audience that the artists understand the way that the genre is currently shaped. Metal performances have gradually evolved over the long history of the genre, but they keep at their core the idea of defiant, excessive outsiderdom. K-pop gigs mirror the extended, complex digital interactions between musicians and an active, organised fanbase. In both cases, generic performances work within a set of symbols and practices fans and artists have come to associate with the genre, and these symbols and practices indicate the wider social context that helps give the genre a flexible but recognisable performative shape. Metal begins as a critically despised genre, at a time of political and economic disruption. As the genre developed, it absorbed visual and spatial cues from the culture that surrounds it, but only if those cues can be used to shore up the genre's sense of itself as extreme and excluded. K-pop develops alongside the rise of social media. Its fanbase forms through a complex network of digital interactions, and in doing so becomes a distinctive, powerful community. K-pop performances trade on those interactions, both in the way that the performances are framed and structured and in the relation between the musicians and audiences during the event itself. In both cases, the musicians' performances have to conform to the genre's current idea of itself, while providing enough variation to mark the musicians off from their peers. In both cases, too, the design of the stage has to reflect the audiences' and musicians' understanding of where the genre currently finds itself. It is not that there is a fixed template, either for the stage, the amplification, the costuming, or the use of props, pyros, or screens. Rather, generic performances will tend to conform to a (loosely determined) idea of the genre and will demonstrate, to all those involved in the event, that musicians and audience both understand how the various scenographic, symbolic, and musical systems that define the genres link

together into a reasonably coherent whole. The generic clues function as part of the general ‘place orientation’ (see [Chapter 3](#)) that the event aims to establish for musicians and audience. In this case, they serve not only to mark off the space as generically appropriate, but to link the space to all the other venues where the genre is performed – no matter where in the world they may be.

Notes

1. Auslander 2023, p. 8. [↩](#)
2. The theorisation of generic forms has, understandably, generated an extensive literature; see, for example, [Borthwick and Moy 2004](#); [Brackett 2005](#); Atton [2010](#), [2011](#); Shuker [2016](#), [2017](#); [Brackett 2016](#); [Klement and Strambach 2019](#); [Lena 2012](#); [Venrooij, Miller, Schmutz and Vaughn 2022](#); [Siebrasse and Wald-Fuhrmann 2023](#). [↩](#)
3. Holt 2007, p. 4. [↩](#)
4. Silver, Lee and Childress 2016, p. 5. [↩](#)
5. Some generic labels are even looser: for example, [Allmusic.com](#) contains the following definition for Aussie Rock:

Aussie Rock does not refer to all rock & roll bands from Australia. Instead, Aussie rock is a particular style of tough hard rock performed by Australian bands that earned their skills by playing the country’s legendarily rough-and-tumble pubs. There’s no specific sound, per se, but there is a certain aesthetic that unites bands as diverse as the Saints, the Celibate Rifles, AC/DC, and Midnight Oil.



6. Monroe 2022. [↗](#)
7. In the stadium shows in the UK later that year, the lighting panels raised or lowered as the song required, and the drapes were replaced by three wide slats on either side of the screen, their size decreasing as they got closer to the wings. [↗](#)
8. Chantler 2022. [↗](#)
9. In [Brown et al. 2016](#). [↗](#)
10. See [Brown et al. 2016](#) and [Rowe 2018](#). [↗](#)
11. See [Heesch and Scott 2016](#); [Rogers and Deflem 2021](#); [Spracklen 2020](#). [↗](#)
12. See [Barratt-Peacock and Hagen 2019](#); [Fletcher and Umurhan 2020](#). [↗](#)
13. Tapp 2023. [↗](#)
14. Rowe 2018. [↗](#)
15. Varas-Díaz and Scott 2016, p. 14. [↗](#)
16. And the band's name, as has frequently been noted, came from a 1961 Italian horror film, directed by Mario Bava. [↗](#)
17. V Live was a South Korean streaming service which operated from 2015 to 2022, when it was merged with Weverse. [↗](#)
18. King-O'Riain 2021, p. 2821. [↗](#)
19. Gong 2022, pp. 4–5. [↗](#)
20. Kim 2018, p. 1. [↗](#)
21. Kim 2023. [↗](#)
22. Kim 2018, p. 94. [↗](#)
23. Kim 2018, [2023](#), p. 174. [↗](#)
24. At the beginning of the Blackpink gig described above, the audience's heart-shaped LEDs glow an appropriate pink. [↗](#)
25. Cho 2023, p. 247. [↗](#)
26. Kim and Kim 2023, pp. 204–5. [↗](#)

27. <https://bts.fandom.com/wiki/ARMY> ↗
28. Letwory and Sihombing 2023. ↗
29. McCurry 2020. ↗
30. Moon 2020. ↗
31. <https://www.newsweek.com/bts-kim-taehyung-purple-meaning-1453501> ↗

5

THE EXTENDED PERSONA

Characterisation and performance

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Introduction

The idea that popular musicians create personae is by now well established, both in popular music culture and in popular music studies.¹ The consensus that has emerged from the critical literature on the subject runs more or less as follows. Musicians and audiences tacitly accept a distance between the performer's persona and their private selves; these personae allow the musician to function in a number of ways that are themselves comprehensible, both to the musicians themselves and to their fans. First, the persona helps the artist create an image that can serve as a badge of identification – a kind of visual and performative shorthand for the real person (Little Richard's quiff, Amy Winehouse's beehive; both fashion choices and performative markers, allying the musician with a particular time and a particular relation to their chosen musical styles). Second, it allows the musician to declare themselves part of a musical community (as noted above, genre-inflected personae provide musicians with a set of ready-made stances, gestures, movements, costume choices, and so on). Third, the artist's control over their persona can be a sign of artistic autonomy. Most notably, and famously, David Bowie ran through a number

of consciously adopted characters during the 1970s – Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, and the Thin White Duke; more recently, Lady Gaga, St Vincent, and Janelle Monáe have all signalled shifts in musical style and approach through shifts in their public personae. Fourth, a persona can act as confirmation, providing a strong signal to the audience that the artist as revealed in the songs and the artist who appears in public are the same person, and are also no different to the people who listen to their music. To take three examples from white, male Rock: Sam Fender (see above) signals to the audience that he is a working-class lad from North Shields; Bruce Springsteen, that he is an ordinary, blue-collar American from New Jersey; Dave Grohl, that despite a career in one of the most significant bands of the past three decades (Nirvana) and in one of the most successful bands of the 21st century (Foo Fighters), he is still an ordinary misfit from the American Midwest.

Lastly, personae can be used to play against generic, cultural, and musical expectations. In its formative years, Rap performance styles tended to favour declarative, assertive maleness (understandable, given the socially subordinate positions occupied by urban Black Americans). However, the performance of male power in Rap has always been balanced against other performative styles that work because they stand in opposition to the idea that a Rapper is an assertive young Black man. Missy Elliott blended female empowerment with something of the freak personae adopted by bands like Funkadelic; De La Soul were the rap version of a hippie community; Kendrick Lamar performs the male rapper as questioning and vulnerable; Lil Nas X (see [Chapter 6](#)) performs an explicitly queer version of the Rap star; and so on. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it does suggest that, in practice, the idea of a performative persona is, in popular music, inherently protean. It operates with rules and boundaries (and I have

discussed some of these boundaries above; the loose constraints imposed by genre, the history of the performer and the form, the expectations of the audience, and so on), but within those boundaries musicians have a great deal of freedom when it comes to shaping and reshaping the personae they adopt. However, all of the variations outlined above have one thing in common. They fall within the artist's control, or, to be more cynical and rather more realistic, within the control of the artist, their management, and the various organisations who stand to benefit from a carefully crafted public image.

In live performance, the creation of a performance persona is an inherently complex affair. For one thing, as Auslander noted in 2021, the creation of a musician's persona in performance is always already diffuse:

I argue that when we see a musician perform, we are not simply seeing the “real person” playing; as with actors, there is an entity that mediates between musicians and the act of performance. When we hear a musician play, the source of the sound is a version of that person constructed for the specific purpose of playing music under particular circumstances. Musical performance may be defined ... as a person's representation of musical identity within a specific discursive domain of music. I posit that in musical performance, this representation is the direct object of the verb *to perform*. In the schema I am proposing, both the musical work and its execution serve the musician's performance of a persona. What musicians perform first and foremost is not music, but their own identities as musicians, their musical personae.²

As Auslander argues, a persona is created through the musician's relation to the music; and in live performance, the audience sees that relation working

out in real time. That music, though, is rarely created solely by the musician themselves. It is created in concert, as a collective of musical workers operate together to craft what the audience hears. Even Ed Sheeran, on his own in front of a crowd, relies on the technicians who maintain his equipment and ensure that the sound the audience hears is as well-crafted and as clear as possible. The musician's persona is, therefore, at least in part a group creation. Moreover, the personae that are created in performance are also part of a wider network of meanings that accrue, not to the artist as musician, but to the artist as celebrity:

Beyonce and Lady Gaga are both household names today, but these are not their given identities. Both women have made careful decisions about their names before taking their respective stages. Beyonce Giselle Knowles and Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta are their given names, but both women have transformed them. Through their use of alter-egos and stage names, Beyonce and Lady Gaga have created ways to craft marketing empires around their chosen names in a competitive arena that rewards outlandish feats. They regularly disrupt public expectations, and their name brands shape a powerful rhetorical space for performing their public persona.³

The branding process Kumari describes enables Gaga to mount complex, intricately structured performance narratives; it enables Beyoncé to perform on a stage against a giant representation of the artist's body as the artist's brand. However, this process cannot be entirely controlled by the artist or by the network of musicians and technicians who create and sustain the performance. Beyoncé might release a disruptive country track ('Texas Hold 'Em,' in 2024), and the song provokes entirely predictable reactions from those who regard country as first and foremost white American music.

Lastly, in live performance, manifestations of the artist's persona can be found everywhere:

The variability and independence of attachments give rise to movements of persona in the space and time existing between artist and audience. Defying complete control from both the artist and the audience, the artistic persona is therefore differently configured in moments of identity, discrete states of relationships among the artist, the artistic persona, and the audience.⁴

And one can broaden this out: the persona exists in suspension, between the artist, the audience, the technology, the music, the context surrounding the gig, and the relation of the gig to the artist's and audience's shared histories. In live performance, the elements that contribute to the formation of the persona are present, but they are not created entirely by the performer. As with the creation of genre-appropriate stages, one might say that the persona is scenographically dispersed – manifested in the figure of the performer, in the staging, in the organisation of the event, and in the audience's perception of all of those things. In what follows, I will trace some of the ways in which this shifting, diffuse idea of the performer's persona manifests itself, even when the artist is for various reasons absent.

Lana Del Rey: The dispersed persona

Lana Del Rey (or Elizabeth Grant) takes the stage in Dublin on the 7th July 2023, after the kind of build-up that befits a major artist on a long arena tour. The lights dim, the stage fills with smoke, the musicians appear, then the backing vocalists (dramatically lit from behind, as a text message – 'God bless you, Dublin' – is projected on the screen at the back of the stage). The lights flare red, then yellow; white spotlights flash in sequence

as Del Rey enters. She looks as her fans might expect her to look: a short, A-line dress with a high neck, dark hair parted in the centre – the same basic dress code she has employed in live work for much of her career. The opening is tightly choreographed. ‘A&W,’ the first track, brings Del Rey to the front of the stage, framed by her troupe of dancers, who attach a long bridal train to her waist as the music transitions to ‘Young and Beautiful.’ As the song progresses, they draw the train out, as though preparing to walk Del Rey down the aisle. The track finishes, the lighting changes to a deep red wash, and Del Rey walks to the side of the stage, sits down at a table bedecked with candles and flowers, and starts to sing ‘Bartender’ as a stagehand lets down her hair. Behind her, the screen carries blurred, heat-scorched footage of an idealised California; the treatment of the film stock makes the images seem as though they are decaying.

Del Rey’s look, the design of the stage (a central stairway at the rear, a catwalk above it, framed arches draped in gauze, lights shaped like streetlamps, trees on each side of the stage), and the vaguely retro costuming of the dancers, in lingerie that could come from catalogues anywhere between the 1950s and the 1980s, are of a piece with the persona the artist established in the early part of her career:

She talks like a dairy queen, like Britney Spears, like a cheerleader. 24 years old and exuding the hardy effervescence unique to healthy American girls, there is nothing in Del Rey’s manner that connects the voice at the end of the line to ‘Video Games’, the YouTube smash hit carried by a purring vocal performance so rich you can feel almost feel David Lynch’s velvet carpeting under your fingers.

That is, until I hit playback on my telephone’s dictaphone. Slowly all the years of a weary, haunted youth spent in backwoods New York State unravel from under her bubbly facade, like furtive murmurings

on the other side of a door. As per the many doomed chanteuses and dead movie idols she invokes in her cinematic music, it seems Del Rey is a good actress. In true Lynch fashion, beneath her white picket-fenced cheer hide the writhing earthworms that plague her heavy heart.⁵

These opening paragraphs self-consciously replicate the montage at the beginning of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986); the wholesome image of the all-American girl, peeling away to reveal the darkness beneath, in much the same way as Lynch's camera pushes below the surface of small-town USA to find horror, violence, and death. This persona attracted criticism in the early years of Del Rey's success. Not only was the artist accused of inauthenticity, but (what was worse) of inhabiting a persona over which she as an individual had any measure of control:

With increasing frequency, naysayers are testing the walls of Del Rey's persona, in particular questioning exactly who should be credited for her perfectly realised *Valley of the Dolls* aesthetic. Amidst universal praise for 'Video Games', she's nevertheless faced the incredulity of everyone from high profile bloggers to broadsheet columnists to disgruntled indie stars (Amy Klein of Titus Andronicus threw her oar in), some of whom are convinced she's a kohl-eyed marketing ploy and as fake as those eyelash extensions.⁶

It is fair to say that this particular accusation was rooted, not only in concerns over what counts as authentic as opposed to inauthentic in popular music, but in the deeply rooted misogyny of the music business. It is hard to imagine a male artist being automatically thought of as simply a blank slate on which his management painstakingly inscribes a character. However, as

Del Rey's career progressed (and as her work garnered a growing, dedicated fanbase and sustained critical acclaim) the accusations subsided. One can track this by reading through reviews of Del Rey's albums on *Pitchfork*; her first, *Born to Die*, is grudgingly accepted as an interestingly crafted but fundamentally empty exercise in Lynchian mythmaking, and gets a rating of 5.5 out of 10. By the release of *Norman Fucking Rockwell!* in 2019, she has been accepted into the canon of great American songwriters – and the album scored 9.4.

The Lana Del Rey taking the stage in Dublin should, therefore, be an artist who by now inhabits her persona with at least a degree of comfort. The footage (and, indeed, footage from the span of Del Rey's career) shows, on the other hand, an artist who is anything but comfortable onstage. She takes part in the choreography, but she does so stiffly, without the performative fluidity of Rihanna, Janelle Monae, Charli XCX, or Taylor Swift. At times, she seems uncertain; at other times, she seems lost. This is, in itself, assimilable, because it is part of the narrative that has formed around the artist; Del Rey has spoken about her diffidence as a performer:

“Lana” and “Lizzy” are the same person. I wish I could escape into some alter-ego, just so I could feel more comfortable onstage, but I feel the same as Lana as I do Lizzy.’⁷

Other artists explicitly discuss their onstage persona as a shield, as something that the artist hides behind (as Beyoncé crafted the confident, assertive Sasha Fierce). Del Rey, however, effaces the distance between her ‘real’ self and the persona she inhabits; both are uncertain, both find themselves in a position of prominence that exposes them, and both of them find that public display only serves to reveal their discomfort. Del Rey, therefore, is not a clearly defined persona, consciously shaped by Elizabeth

Grant, that stands at a comfortable remove from Grant's offstage self; but this does not mean that Del Rey has disappeared, because her fans know more about Grant. Rather, the Del Rey persona has been dispersed. It is not entirely bound up in the figure of Elizabeth Grant; for one thing, it has been taken up by the artist's fanbase. See, for example, this review of Del Rey's Hyde Park performance in 2023:

Weirdness, messiness and dark comedy are what the fans are here for. For them, Lana is more recognisably human, more relatable, than the distant, alien perfection of a Beyoncé, which explains why Del Rey's abbreviated Glastonbury appearance – when her usual tardiness crashed into an immovable curfew – is an escapade to add to her myth rather than detract from it. Everywhere there are little Lanas in lacy petticoats, white dresses, flower crowns, cowgirl boots, heart-shaped sunglasses, fizzing with Mentos-in-Coke-bottle levels of excitement. A mass wedding of brides, waiting for their mother-wife.⁸

Del Rey's fans embrace the diffidence and uncertainty of Del Rey the performer; more than this, they adopt the persona itself. Facing them, moreover, is a set which itself is formed from the signifiers of the Del Rey persona (see the description of the Dublin performance above). One might say that Grant's performative diffidence doesn't in itself puncture or detract from the idea of Lana Del Rey as persona; that persona is already dispersed – between the artist, the material, the costuming, the choreography, the stage set, and the crowd.

The Weeknd: The designed persona

It's clear that the rumors are true: Abel and The Weeknd are two very different beings. The Weeknd has the longest-charting song by a solo artist in history and billions of worldwide streams. The Weeknd spent his pandemic in a red blazer licking frogs dipped in LSD. Abel, meanwhile, was bingeing *The X-Files*. ("Everyone copied them, bro," he told me. "Everyone.") Abel talks about getting a good night's sleep the way someone might talk about good MDMA. He has been rediscovering L.A.: Last year, when the streets emptied out, he started taking long walks. He exudes a type of politeness found only in the world capital of politeness (Ontario, Canada). The Weeknd is the guy who destroys the suite at Caesars Palace like in *The Hangover*. Abel is the sweet guy whom they lose in the first 30 minutes and spend the rest of the movie trying to find.⁹

The Weeknd (the stage name adopted by the singer Abel Tesfaye) was forced to cancel a major tour in 2020 because of the onset of the pandemic. For Tesfaye, this happened at a particularly difficult time. The Weeknd's audience had been growing, and with the release of the critically acclaimed album *After Hours* (2020), which was generally seen as a return to the complexity of his first three mixtapes,¹⁰ he was ready to move from the arena stages of his last tour to stadiums. *After Hours*, as an album, wasn't entirely what one might have expected from an artist reaching the apogee of his fame. The Weeknd, Tesfaye's alter-ego, was a self-destructive loser, and *After Hours* tracked the character through a drug-fuelled, destructive journey through the night. The album's atmosphere was caught in a short film, posted to mark its release. It began with a tight close-up of Tesfaye's eye, pulling back to show him accepting applause at the end of a performance on Jimmy Kimmel's late-night talk show. Tesfaye grinned, accepting the host's praise and the audience's applause, but he looked in

bad shape – his nose was bandaged and blood trickled down from his brow. The camera followed him as he walked to the subway, growing more and more distressed, and climaxed with what seemed like a full fugue-state breakdown, with Tesfaye dragged down the platform as a train shot past. Such an uncompromising, if not alienating, promotion might seem inappropriate, at a time of global trauma. However, neither the pandemic itself nor the forced interruption to what had been a gradually expanding cultural profile did not do the artist any harm. In fact, in 2021 one of *After Hours*' tracks, 'Blinding Lights,' reached number one on *Billboard*'s 'Hottest Song of All Time' chart; the song's and the album's popularity was boosted through online performances, remixes, a TikTok dance challenge, and a typically elaborate performance at the 2020 Superbowl.

After Hours, like Tesfaye's earliest recordings, concerned itself with the solipsistic urban hedonism of its central character; *Dawn FM* (2022), his next release, was something different:

Picture the album being like the listener is dead. And they're stuck in this purgatory state, which I always imagined would be like being stuck in traffic waiting to reach the light at the end of the tunnel. And while you're stuck in traffic, they got a radio station playing in the car, with a radio host guiding you to the light and helping you transition to the other side. So it could feel celebratory, could feel bleak, however you want to make it feel, but that's what *The Dawn* is for me.^{[11](#)}

The album is punctuated by station idents, and an unctuous DJ, played by Jim Carrey, reassures the listener that they have been in the dark for long enough, and now it's time to walk into the light. The previous album's protagonist was hurtling gleefully to destruction; the new album used the same musical template (1980s influenced electronica), but the lyrics

suggested both regret and an attempt to understand and atone for the past. This shift was mirrored in other aspects of the album's marketing. *After Hours*' promotional material had placed The Weeknd, in a distinctive red jacket and shades, against the garish lights of Las Vegas. At the opening of *The Dawn FM Experience*,¹² The Weeknd staggered his way into what seemed an abandoned warehouse; a light snapped on, to reveal a mournful face far older than the grinning, bloodstained Weeknd of the previous album (Tesfaye's tired, aged face was also used for *Dawn FM*'s front cover). The new album wasn't as monumentally successful as its predecessor, but it was still commercially significant (not least because *After Hours*' impact hadn't faded – in January 2024, 'Blinding Lights' became the first song to pass four billion streams on Spotify). When The Weeknd's tour was rescheduled, post-pandemic, it therefore had a substantial amount of new material to accommodate; and that new material, added to the *After Hours* tracks, implied a narrative, a Dantean journey through abjection to at least a tentative salvation. This story, moreover, had to be fitted into venues that suited the artist's elevated status.

When the tour began in Philadelphia on the 14 July 2022, at Lincoln Financial Field, it did so on a set designed by Es Devlin, a British designer who had worked with Tesfaye on the *Legend of the Fall* arena tour in 2017.¹³ Devlin had by this time amassed a reputation for striking and innovative designs across a number of art forms (theatre, music, installations, and so on); she had created stage sets for Beyoncé's *Formation* and *Renaissance*, Kanye West's *Yeezus*, and Miley Cyrus' *Bangerz*. In interviews, Devlin had expressed dissatisfaction with what she saw as a dully conventional default stage set-up, adopted by the bands she was familiar with in her youth (the drums raised at the rear of the stage, a backline of amps and other equipment, and a frontline of instrumentalists

framing the singer, arranged in what was for Devlin an aesthetically uninspiring hump-backed shape). Devlin's designs tended to eschew this framing. In its place, she created stage settings that, as she would have it, engaged imaginatively both with the artist's output and with the audience's engagement with the artist:

(Devlin) believes that during performances, most of what the spectators experience lie inside their minds, reducing the stage to a mere accessory or tool that helps to manifest the pure essence of the artist's work, what they want to translate into their mode of works.¹⁴

Interestingly, Devlin described her practice in terms that mirror the processes of fandom. It began with the kind of deep dive into the material that a fan would undertake; she mined the available material both for its ostensible meaning and for the clues it gave about the nature of the world the material constructed:

I really quite methodically go, okay, let's listen to the lyrics, let's write down the lyrics that we respond to, let's try and find a poetry, let's try and find a story. And each time an actor or a singer sings or says a word, then that's another question – what should be around them while they're saying this?¹⁵

The large-scale imaginative environments (in a striking phrase, Devlin described them as 'effectivist sculptures' – that is, art with extreme purpose and impact.¹⁶) had to take account of the artist's imputed intentions, gleaned from the material, the physically present audience's engagement with those intentions, and, finally, with an expanded audience, who will access the design online:

If you look at most concerts before 2003, most of the photos were done by professional photographers near the front, and you'll see a big god-like image of the pop star and a load of lights behind. And that's how the imagery was recorded and that's how most people who didn't go would perceive the show. So cut to cameras on phones ... suddenly that event is being recorded from every angle, and therefore my work is suddenly being seen from every angle and being understood in a different way. So it's a big shift. (Artists) are aware that how many people will perceive this show will be via those media (YouTube etc), so to a degree, we're designing to a square at the moment. That will probably change. Instagram might suddenly become a triangle.¹⁷

For Devlin, therefore, stage design was not simply a question of branding the performance with the pre-existing image of the performer. Each show reframed that image, in the light of the material the artist produced, and the audience's imaginative engagement with that material both at and outside of the event.

The material on *After Hours* and *Dawn FM*, as the above descriptions suggest, already contained the kind of imaginative framework Devlin required. The albums provided a clear, linked narrative frame; the stage set that Devlin designed for the tour gave that narrative an equally clear physical shape:

‘The initial ideas were rooted in the world Abel and La Mar [La Mar Taylor, Tesfaye's artistic director] created around ... *After Hours*,’ which Tesfaye has described as ‘my thoughts from 3am to 5am.’ Devlin characterises the initial production concept as ‘a distorted, through-the-looking-glass city, as if Abel's life had cracked open at a specific chapter and he couldn't escape a particular scene in Vegas

playing on constant repeat. As we shifted from arenas to stadiums, Vegas started to take on mythological proportions, rising out of the desert and encompassing a series of real, fictional, and science-fictional cities.’¹⁸

Dawn FM’s release changed the narrative. The Weeknd, the archetypally toxic and self-hating RnB male, was no longer trapped in one location, enduring a contemporary version of the suffering of Dante’s damned:

[Devlin] ‘The dystopian North American city was joined by a chorus of veiled women and a 30’ invocation of the moon. The stage is conceived as a journey from After Hours to the Dawn, from the detailed dystopian desert city to the archetypal moon.’ Taylor describes it as ‘Abel’s journey through purgatory.’¹⁹

The stage was therefore converted into an elongated catwalk, with a series of intermediate stages (a rectangular one just below the cityscape, a circular stage halfway along the catwalk,²⁰ and a diamond stage over which the moon was suspended). The cityscape took up most of what would normally be a stadium set’s main performance space; at a set point during each performance (usually during the track ‘Hurricane’), it was consumed by smoke and fire. The constrained main stage pushed Tesfaye’s performance on to the catwalk and the intermediate stages; the normal, end-on arrangement of stadium gigs was, in other words, converted into a form of transverse staging – appropriate for the implied narrative of the performance (which catches The Weeknd in transit between the hell of *After Hours* and the salvation not quite attained in *Dawn FM*). The stage was lit, predominantly in washes of red, light blue, and white; the red washes tended to feature most strongly early in the performance, with whites and

light blues predominant towards the end – another indication that the show loosely described the move from Hell to Purgatory. At the show's beginning, Tesfaye appeared masked (in the early shows, he wore an ill-fitting plastic face covering, which made him look to one reviewer like the victim of bad plastic surgery,²¹ and in the later shows the mask was metallic, in line with the cyberpunk design of the cityscape). The masks were shed after the first two tracks, implying that The Weeknd was determined to discard his previous self.

This narrative, which, we can assume, would be familiar to an extent to the crowds in each stadium, is both strict enough to give each performance a shape and loose enough to enable substantial changes in the set list as the tour has progressed. It relied on a shared awareness, on the part of the audience, the designers, the performers, and Tesfaye, that The Weeknd was a character, ambiguously related to Tesfaye himself. It could be said, too, that this awareness itself is part of a wider network of more or less shared cultural meanings. We could list the fact that the very idea of musician as embodying a persona is so widespread, and so accepted, as to cause both Tesfaye and his audience no difficulty, even though, as I note above, the relation between the two is purposefully ambiguous. We could note, too, that the implied shape of the loose story told by *After Hours til Dawn* is itself entirely culturally familiar. It marries the idea of a descent into hell with the suggestion of a journey to atonement – a very familiar arc, whether from *The Divine Comedy*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, or *Akira*, or any number of popular cultural texts. However, and crucially, at no point are any of these framings and templates imposed so strictly as to restrain Tesfaye in performance. The idea of the performance as a long atonement is very lightly sketched – at no point do the catwalk and the intermediate stages turn into a representation of the stations of the cross, or

of Dante's journey to salvation. Even The Weeknd himself is only partially present – indicated by Tesfaye's costuming, the mask he wears, the lyrics of songs like 'House of Balloons,' 'Can't Feel My Face,' 'Take My Breath' and 'Out of Time,' and the stage layout (and the relation of that layout to Tesfaye's last two albums). The Weeknd's persona determines the design of the performance, as does Lana Del Rey's; this time, however, the design suggests not an environment, but a progress – a lightly sketched journey from suggested damnation to implied redemption.

Daft Punk: The Absent Persona

Daft Punk's 2007 gigs opened in a manner familiar to anyone who had even a passing acquaintance with Kraftwerk's performance history. As glitched, distorted voices chanted 'robot, human,' white spotlights shone first upwards and then downwards, silhouetting the musicians; the voices speeded up, then, as the track 'Robot Rock' started playing, they overlapped, blurring into each other. Both the music and the musicians (dressed in leather and the latest iteration of the robot helmets Daft Punk adopted in 2001) invoked and expanded the Kraftwerk ideal – the man/machine, a mutually beneficial fusion of the human and the technological. If anything, Daft Punk seemed to present this ideal in a purer, more rigorous form. Kraftwerk might create complex performances in which the idea of the active musician was dismissed (see above), but when they walked on stage they did so as decidedly human, their faces visible. Daft Punk wore helmets, and not just on stage:

They used to call the Hyatt Regency Hotel on Los Angeles' Sunset Strip the 'Riot Hyatt'... It's calmed down a lot lately, but it's still a fair bet that the hotel has never seen anything quite like the scene around

the rooftop pool on this unseasonably chilly late afternoon in May. Two tall, slender French gentlemen, dressed head to toe in black leather and wearing futuristic robot helmets, are relaxing on *chaise longues* by the edge of the pool, both holding colourful, frou-frou frozen drinks with mini umbrellas. Daft Punk – on holiday, but never off duty.^{[22](#)}

And whereas Kraftwerk would in interview always insist that they aimed to blend the biological with the cybernetic, Daft Punk on occasion jokingly claimed that they had been fully transformed:

‘There was an accident in our studio. We were working on our sampler, and at exactly 9:09 a.m. on September 9, 1999, it exploded. When we regained consciousness, we discovered that we had become robots.’^{[23](#)}

In performance, as I’ve noted elsewhere,^{[24](#)} Kraftwerk’s stage set indicated that the group were working people, doing what working people do in a digital, online culture: human beings, at workstations, operating the technologies that shape the modern world. Daft Punk went quite a bit further, something the 2007 performances made clear from the outset. The stage set for the shows was taken from the video created for the track ‘Technologic’ (from the album *Human After All*). In the video, a cybernetic baby watches, hypnotised, as its onscreen double chants what seem like a string of instructions; the baby onscreen (a disturbing mixture of metal, ceramics, and prosthetics) sits on a platform under the apex of a pyramid. The 2007 tour used the pyramid, rotated so that one edge faced the audience, and placed Daft Punk in the position vacated by the onscreen child. The Weeknd’s set suggested that Abel Tesfaye was a modern Dante,

atoning for his sins; Daft Punk's set supported a different narrative – that of the performer as blank-faced robot, seamlessly integrated into the digital world. For Del Rey and The Weeknd, the staging worked because of what the audience already knew about Tesfaye's and Grant's personae; for Daft Punk, the staging worked because of what (or who) the audience didn't know. Daft Punk were, to all intents and purposes, a pair of helmets and leather jackets. The actual people (Thomas Bangalter and Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo) were not only anonymous; they were entirely effaced, subsumed completely within the technologies driving the event.

Daft Punk's 2007 tour is generally regarded as one of the most significant tours undertaken by a dance music act.²⁵ It came at a rather difficult time in the duo's career. 2001's *Discovery* had been both critically and commercially successful; the follow-up album, *Human After All* (2005) which eschewed the disco, soul, and RnB of its predecessor, in favour of a more abrasive sonic template, had attracted the worst reviews of the duo's career. The 2007 tour, it is fair to say, did more than rescue their reputation; it transformed Daft Punk from a fading (if still important) force in contemporary popular music to the heralds of a new style of live performance. The first intimation of this transformation came when the duo played the Coachella Festival in 2006. Up to that point, Coachella had been primarily associated with Indie (both American and British), rock, and Hip-hop. EDM had featured (The Chemical Brothers and Underworld played the inaugural event in 1999), but the event's headliners tended to be bands such as Radiohead, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and The Cure. Electronica was not, on the face of it, an easy fit for the festival itself or for its attendees. However, Daft Punk's performance is now seen as one of the keynotes of Coachella, as important in the history of the Festival as Pulp at Glastonbury in 1995:

Witnesses describe Daft Punk's Coachella set as though it was a religious experience: the second coming, at least. For me it was jaw-on-the-floor, mind-blowingly awesome and innovative and somehow better than we ever remembered. Thomas and Guy-Man tweaked and twiddled behind a massive lectern with 70s game show graphics popping in the background, framed by a rainbow-flashing diamond. The Daft show came off as old school and fresh at the same time, and when it ground to a screeching halt many people simply refused to leave.^{[26](#)}

The 2007 tour itself was greeted equally rapturously; reviewing the live album (*Alive 2007*) Ryan Dombal invoked the sheer sensory overload the shows created:

The blitzing "Pimp My Pyramid" scheme. The pulsing honeycomb. The tiny metal heads bobbing up and down. The Lite-Brite leather jacket reveal. The dude in front of me who wouldn't let a pair of crutches stop him from dancing as if the apocalypse were mere minutes away. The sensual explosion that was Daft Punk's *Alive 2007* show is difficult to overstate—or reproduce. Even with the biggest, flattest, sharpest HD setup, there's no way to sufficiently recreate the most exuberant LED-laden music blowout ever staged.^{[27](#)}

And for a succeeding generation of artists (in a genre now termed EDM, or Electronic Dance Music, which has come to be defined as electronica that plays to a mass audience, and that is staged with the kind of elaborate technologies first employed on this scale during the 2006 tour) seeing Daft Punk live was a transformative experience:

For Skrillex, one of the 2010s' true producer-DJ superstars, seeing the show in LA "was like walking into the portal of my destiny. It left an instant and indelible mark on my psyche. The idea of delivering a full concert experience while departing from a band on stage was game-changing – not just for me but for all creators."²⁸

The shows, then, effected a change in cultural status for the kind of music Daft Punk had helped to pioneer in the 1990s. As with all such changes, the consequences of this shift have been in some ways problematic; previous associations with marginalised groups (Black American and British cultures, the LGBT+ communities, for example) have been effaced, and again as with all such shifts, it has had an effect on other genres, styles, and means of presentation in popular music. For example, the success of the tour elevated Daft Punk's status; this in turn led Kanye West to sample their work (the *Discovery* track 'Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger' forms the backdrop for 'Stronger' on 2007's *Graduation*). The success of 'Stronger' in turn helped effect a rapprochement between Electronica and Hip-hop, paving the way for (amongst many others) artists like The Weeknd (see above).

The tour, then, was significant in the development of 21st century popular music. As footage of the event shows, its success came from the melding of two previously separate styles of presentation. The remixed music and the framing of the musicians came from club culture; the scale of the technology, and the gradual revelation of the potential of the stage technologies, came from arena rock and pop. However, there was more to the event than a simple scaling up of the usual technologies that supported live electronic music. For one thing, Daft Punk themselves could not be easily transformed into the central figures in the performance. Partly, this is due to the way that DJ/EDM shows work. The musician (and here I use the

term to describe anyone who creates and manipulates the musical output in live performance; working with software is as complex a musical task as playing guitar) is, generally, not in a position to become the dynamic centre of the performance. In clubs, the DJ might control the music, but they are at best a secondary visual centre. The crowd's main focus is, understandably, on itself. Also, the creation of the music in performance requires a different relation to the technology than one finds in other forms of popular music. The technology has to be the clear, central focus of the artist's attention; tracks are subject to manipulation, both in preparation and in the moment. For example, the opening of Daft Punk's shows featured a seamless transition between 'Robot Rock,' 'Oh Yeah,' 'Touch It,' and 'Technologic,' sequenced, as they would be in a club, to ensure that the beat remained constant. In manipulating the music, the musician is guided by their relation to the audience – the beat can be slowed, the volume dropped and gradually raised, samples pulled from the mix and re-introduced, all to keep the audience engaged and dancing. In the creation of this music, there is no place for the kind of dynamic, motivated movement that characterises (for example) K-pop. Assembling the music is too complex a task, and the figure of the active musician is not quite as central as in other genres. Even superstar DJs like Calvin Harris are usually swamped by the audiovisual technologies that surround them.

Allied to this (as David Stark noted in 2020) there is in dance music a long tradition of aliases, which offer the electronic musician both a measure of anonymity and the ability to experiment (one thinks of Skrillex, named above; Deadmau5; Squarepusher; Burial; and so on). Stark argues that adopting aliases in this context doesn't necessarily mean the creation of a fully fledged persona, as in the case of Del Rey or The Weeknd, whose

identity will come to define the musician. Rather, it opens up a space in which the artist can exercise creative freedom:

Name-altering practices put the artist to the test. Elaborated further with examples below, we observe that the alias is a device that allows the exploration of one's role and potentiality, while keeping responsibility at a distance. Being connected to the artist but, at the same time, distinguished from her, the alias has a double character which fuels the testing dynamics. On the one hand, the alias has enough distance from the artist, making possible its observation from the outside, and its modification, updating, or even denial. On the other hand, the alias is an expressive and expressed part of the artist, and therefore the test outcome of its use can be projected back onto the artist.^{[29](#)}

In other words, the persona is not a defined character; it is a blank space, on which the artist and the audience can both express and explore their response to the music. For Bangalter, the robot costumes the duo adopted from 1999 onwards, and the personae they suggested, precisely fulfilled this function:

[Daft Punk's] mechanized identities ... act as a buffer for the out-of-control egomania that could result from a sea of people losing their shit in your general direction as you stand over them from the apex of a million-watt triangle.

“Looking at robots is not like looking at an idol,” contends de Homem-Christo. “It’s not a human being, so it’s more like a mirror—the energy people send to the stage bounces back and everybody has a good time together rather than focusing on us.”^{[30](#)}

It's an amusing paradox: the more bizarrely visible the outfit, the more it guarantees the invisibility of the musician; the more it foregrounds the people watching, listening, and dancing. One can also see this logic playing out in the stage space. The pyramid is placed centre stage; as the show progresses, its panels (which contain giant LED screens) display computer-generated, first-generation video game graphics, alternating with solid blocks of colour. A latticework of fluorescent tubes (in a triangular grid) flanked the pyramid on both sides; behind the pyramid, a giant LED screen filled the back of the stage from the floor to the lighting rig. Daft Punk were positioned exactly in the centre of a set which, as with Del Rey's faux gothic Americana and The Weeknd's purgatorial journey from urban hell to implied redemption, created a framework appropriate to the audience's idea of the musicians, but those musicians were not themselves the centre of the event. Spotlights didn't track their every move; the staging itself seemed designed to mask them, as much as to reveal them. For example, 'Da Funk,' the duo's break out hit, was accompanied by bright white bands of light playing across the surface of the pyramid. As the track developed, the latticework flashed, first white, then in streaks of colour; lights at floor level and around the pyramid flashed straight out into the audience. In this midst of all of this, the two figures in the centre of the stage seemed almost entirely unimportant.

As noted above, this type of staging is reminiscent of the employment of stage technologies in club culture. As Luis Manuel-Garcia has noted, the creation of an affective response to both the music and the event is a key part of dance music. This response is created by the music (loud, with bass frequencies registering as a physical presence, that is felt, as much as heard), and lighting that is closely synched to the music and frequently deployed for sensory overload. The affective mechanisms deployed in

performance help to create an embodied, emotional response to the music; as one of Garcia's interviewees put it in 2009:

The build-up [montée] that you had been waiting for comes, and so you begin to explode, because you're happy. A vibration, for me, is something that comes from the bottom of the gut, and that you want to discharge [expulser] by throwing your hands in the air, yelling, and hugging your friends.^{[31](#)}

Garcia argues that EDM artist and audiences recognise, value, and seek out this kind of reaction; indeed, that the form itself is predicated on a shared response to the cultural and musical signals housed in the music:

When two bodies share the same resonant frequencies, a self-amplifying feedback loop can result, such as when two mechanical metronomes gradually come into synchrony, or when one vibrating tuning fork causes another one nearby to vibrate in sympathy. What this implies for sonic affect is that certain frequencies and patterns of fluctuation have the capacity to excite certain bodies and incite them to move, respond, express, and/or re-transmit this energy.^{[32](#)}

As Garcia points out, this shared investment in the sonic frequencies employed in EDM is itself a powerful binding agent – acting to draw everyone participating in the event together:

This conversion of vibratory energies may be less culturally determined in some cases – such as the overwhelming force of loud bass frequencies – and yet a dancing crowd's enthusiastic response to familiar tunes or an exciting new track entails a kind of energy-conversion that is relayed through micro-cultural knowledge and

socially formed taste. Indeed, electronic dance music's preponderance of sounds that foreground the haptic dimensions of musical experience is itself an affective aesthetic, that is, the result of a culturally situated valorisation of sonic experiences that seem to short-circuit music-as-language signification and engender embodied relationality.³³

In Daft Punk's 2007 performances, this haptic response – sensual, physical, subverting rationality – is triggered not just by the music, but by the scenography. The design of the set seems to lead the audience's attention away from the musicians; indeed, at some points – for example, the long intro to 'Face to Face' – the duo entirely disappear. The lighting doesn't illuminate the stage space, as it would be expected to do for performers in other genres. Rather, the rows and lines of spotlights are aimed outward, illuminating the audience and frequently leaving Daft Punk, the ostensible stars of the show, in the dark.

The staging conforms to (or, more correctly we might say sets the template for) EDM live work in the 21st century. As the authors of *Electronic Music* point out, this is a style that is more interested in texture and rhythm than in melody and harmony: one that is predicated on an ideal of direct communication between crowds and audiences; one that promotes the idea of facelessness over the performative celebration of the star performer (even the most successful artist isn't the centre of the performance; the crowd is); and one which is by its nature non-hierarchical.³⁴ Given all this, one might assume that Daft Punk's robotic personae merely reinforce the democratic anonymity of the genre. The robots are not, it might seem, characters themselves, or avatars of the world outside of the performance (as are Kraftwerk's robots – see [Albiez and Pattie 2011](#)). They are as blank, as unreadable, as their visors. However, whereas Kraftwerk's robots were (intentionally) stiffly mechanical, and

Kraftwerk the musicians studiously unemphatic, Daft Punk move like DJs – focussed on the music, but also responding to it, heads bobbing in time, moving back and forth between the various technologies in front of them, raising their hands and clapping in time, nodding at the end of the show as they acknowledge the cheers of the crowd, and so on. The robots, in this instance, are human – their blankness suggesting, not rational efficiency, but the anonymity of the embodied, haptic, unified crowd.

In 2006, Daft Punk released a film, as part of the marketing for *Human After All*. *Daft Punk's Electroma* (as the film was titled) grew from the videos Daft Punk created for the singles 'Robot Rock' and 'Technologic.' It was the second time that the band had linked a film to the release of an album. *Discovery*, in 2001, was accompanied by *Interstella 5555*, an anime created by Toei Animation; the film soundtracked the album, and individual tracks were hived off and used as promotional videos for singles. *Electroma* was different. For one thing, it didn't feature anything from *Human After All*. In fact, it didn't use any of Daft Punk's music – the eclectic soundtrack featured Todd Rundgren, Brian Eno, Linda Perhacs, Gregorio Allegri, Joseph Haydn, and Jackson Frank. The film's plot is simple. The Daft Punk robots (not played by the musicians themselves) drive through a town populated by robots, each one wearing one or other of the duo's helmets, to a clinic where blank, silhouetted technicians dress them in white and pour flesh-coloured latex over their helmets, creating cartoonishly grotesque human faces roughly modelled on Daft Punk themselves. The pair walk happily out into the town, only to find that their new appearance disturbs the other residents. Then, to make things worse, the latex starts to melt, sliding off the smooth surface of their visors. Dispirited, the duo walk out into the desert where the film began; one self-destructs, and the other

smashes its helmet against the ground and uses the shattered visor to set itself alight.

The film, then, enacts the album title; the robots wish to be human, after all. One can see the same dynamic playing out over the course of Daft Punk's career: the sampled, stripped back techno of *Homework* (1997) ceding to the live instrumentation of *Random Access Memories* (2013). One can see it demonstrated, also, in the live shows in 2006 and 2007. Daft Punk present themselves as robots, but they do not perform like robots. They perform with the same affective involvement as the crowd. Their robotic identities are not placed at the centre of the performance (as would be the case with Kraftwerk); in fact, the performance is centred (as much as it is centred anywhere) on the haptic engagement of the audience with the staging, the music, and with each other. One might say that these live shows work because, in dance music, the persona of the performer is indissolubly linked to the actions of the crowd. The Weeknd's staging creates a dramatic location for his persona, elevating its importance above the response of the audience; Daft Punk's staging creates a space where the robots are just the same as the people who watch. Robot or human, everyone has come to participate in what Garcia calls the 'embodied relationality' of the event; helmeted or not, robotic or human, everyone has come to dance.

Conclusion

In 'Moments of Identity,' Formilan and Stark argue for the idea of persona as a three-way conversation between all of the participants in the event:

In our triadic theory of identity, we locate persona not as a simple mediator or intermediary between person and other but in a multi-sided relationship: person with persona, others with persona, and

person with others. In our empirical case, these relations are characterized as artist-persona, audience-persona, and audience-artist.³⁵

This is a very useful idea; it shifts the burden of persona formation away from the artist exclusively, and locates it in the event – the artist and the audience both play a role in forming and sustaining a performance persona. However, it could be argued that it does not go far enough. In live performance, as I've argued, scenography is extended; that is, it is designed to play out to and to include the audience – to indicate to the audience that they are part of the same world as the artist. As the above examples demonstrate, one could also argue that the artist's persona is also extended. It is manifested in the artist, certainly; Del Rey looks like the kind of Lynchian character one might expect from her songs, Tesfaye wears masks that present him as either a cyborg or a warped, melted version of himself, and Daft Punk look like robots, in every performance and in every publicity shot. In each case, the audience's idea of the artist's persona is confirmed. However, in each case the artist's persona is dispersed around the performance space. Del Rey's set is drenched in faded Hollywood glamour, as though ready for incorporation in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*; The Weeknd performs on a walkway long enough to suggest a purgatorial journey, from a burning city to the purity of an illuminated moon suspended over the performance space; and Daft Punk are robots – technological artefacts who are completely subsumed beneath the rest of the onstage technology.

In each case, too, the link between the persona and the onstage performance is constructed differently, but in each case the staging and the performance provide the audience with personae that have to be constructed from all of the elements within the show. In Del Rey's case, the setting and

the audience's perception of the relation between the setting and the artist's material compensate for Del Rey's performative diffidence. In The Weeknd's case, the narrative implied by the performance space allows Tesfaye and the audience considerable flexibility in both the choice of material and the way the material is presented. In Daft Punk's case, the performers' personas are intentionally, robotically blank, but their performance does not trade on the idea that Daft Punk are automata. Rather, the performance uses scenographic technologies to promote affective engagement with the music and the event: an engagement that, in performance, both of the Daft Punk robots visibly share. In other words, any persona created in performance is both constantly negotiated (as Formilan and Stark suggest) and dispersed – displayed to and for the audience and the performer across the performance space, as an integral part of the extended scenography of the event.

Notes

1. See, for example: [Moore 2012](#); [Pattie 2007](#); Auslander [2006](#), [2021](#); [Hooper 2014](#); [Viñuela 2020](#); [Baum 2016](#); [Hess 2005](#); [Vannieuwenhuyze 2024](#); [Hansen 2019](#); [Jost 2024](#). ↵
2. Auslander 2021, p. 88. ↵
3. Kumari 2016, p. 405. ↵
4. Formilan and Stark, p. 41. ↵
5. John Calvert, Lana Del Rey: Original Sin *The Quietus*, 2011. ↵
6. John Calvert, Lana Del Rey: Original Sin *The Quietus*, 2011. ↵
7. John Calvert, Lana Del Rey: Original Sin *The Quietus*, 2011. ↵
8. Morris 2023. ↵
9. Green 2021. ↵

10. Collected together as *Trilogy*, 2012. [!\[\]\(76af819c4854e5a45045b1bc9a643597_img.jpg\)](#)
11. Mamo 2021. [!\[\]\(7e254492573b14b2ed8d9f5d27f73ae7_img.jpg\)](#)
12. A promotional film, released on streaming platforms on the album's release. [!\[\]\(8bbaacc76150943ee34604e0a4d2785e_img.jpg\)](#)
13. For this tour, Devlin created a striking starship design, which could be hoisted above the arena floor to reveal a flexible lighting rig and coloured panels. [!\[\]\(9f4c159c1724903789a0231675b00217_img.jpg\)](#)
14. Gujuluva, n.d. [!\[\]\(a0fd3573a0a1182c50753595c176060c_img.jpg\)](#)
15. Gujuluva, n.d. [!\[\]\(b4051c879060c458f3d603cf16a0d240_img.jpg\)](#)
16. Pasori 2022. [!\[\]\(e3d7ca743bcbb5b943c6583b3a148a4d_img.jpg\)](#)
17. Devlin 2019. [!\[\]\(cf9b05114ab3bda0607b9bbbe9993314_img.jpg\)](#)
18. Barbour, David 'Night Music,' *Lighting and Sound America*, Oct 2022, p. 51. [!\[\]\(b3aec3c20cf8c02ae3157c89676055dc_img.jpg\)](#)
19. Barbour, David 'Night Music.' [!\[\]\(f3f813a9408fdc5a5e0c9b19a2493470_img.jpg\)](#)
20. This stage was initially bare, but on the European leg of the tour it was occupied by the giant statue of a female robot, designed by Hajime Sorayama; the robot had previously appeared in the anniversary video for 'Echoes of Silence' – one of the Weeknd's early tracks. [!\[\]\(60e3abed82ab3e4d631b8d789183876b_img.jpg\)](#)
21. Wood 2022. [!\[\]\(a4c23c652983957b7f0bfd4b3dc3937e_img.jpg\)](#)
22. Ely, Suzanne 'Return of the Cybermen,' *Mixmag*, July 2006. [!\[\]\(c1aefa7bfad94a18e735bf52cebb0c8c_img.jpg\)](#)
23. Barbour, David 'Night Music.' [!\[\]\(8f75bd9e9e9bd592f52a9a4e9fef1d47_img.jpg\)](#)
24. Albiez and Pattie 2011. [!\[\]\(c419fe00d3e3892c419132ec7d5a5321_img.jpg\)](#)
25. Harshman 2016; [Blisten 2021](#); [Gaffar 2021](#). [!\[\]\(a294ec2da005691f1c92a5df45dfc3a1_img.jpg\)](#)
26. Taylor 2021. [!\[\]\(036923d32f0c37cfb4c17be67cd511cb_img.jpg\)](#)
27. Dombal 2007. [!\[\]\(561d0fb0fdafc3a4c881164119939748_img.jpg\)](#)
28. Szatan 2021. [!\[\]\(86997903d41ed4693984767a34edc24d_img.jpg\)](#)
29. Formilan & Stark 2020, p. 573. [!\[\]\(abb3e00e695fbb1076810607c55edc5e_img.jpg\)](#)
30. Dombal 2013. [!\[\]\(bec9e0abbc38ccd5fdfe5cedd32a1669_img.jpg\)](#)

31. Carcia Mispireta 2020, p. 27. [!\[\]\(5351ece0fe699d1b5f044c7fdd5ba48f_img.jpg\)](#)
32. Carcia Mispireta 2020, p. 30. [!\[\]\(ef5d414217451675e50cde692746b560_img.jpg\)](#)
33. Carcia Mispireta 2020, p. 30. [!\[\]\(09de85c789161be1bdc76556f39fa42b_img.jpg\)](#)
34. Collins, Margaret, and Wilson 2013, p. 112. [!\[\]\(d8c2a2ef1e4ae54daf6cc1094b95558f_img.jpg\)](#)
35. Formilan & Stark 2020, p. 36. [!\[\]\(80416db13fa257ca8be58add0f72663b_img.jpg\)](#)

6

PERFORMANCE NARRATIVES

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Introduction

Good evening. We've written a big lump of story and music and we'd like to play the whole thing for you tonight. It tells of how a large black cloud descends into Time Square and straddles out across 42nd Street, turns into a wall and sucks in Manhattan Island. Our hero, named Rael, crawls out of the subways of New York and is sucked into the wall, to regain consciousness underground. This is the story of Rael.¹

Tonight is a very special night. Of course, we're playing in London, and, er, it's the last stop of our tour, and it's the last show for Genesis. Yes, it's difficult for us to believe, that you still came out to see us (laughs). Yes, after tonight, we've all got to get real jobs.²

The two quotes above, taken from shows at either end of Genesis' long live career, serve something like the same function. Both are spoken by the frontperson, both communicate necessary information to the audience, and both rely on the fact that, for much of the audience, this information will not be new. Those going to see Genesis in the US in 1975 would, one can assume, be at least partially aware of the album the band were touring, so the news that almost the whole evening would be given over to a

performance of their recently released concept album *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* would not have come as too much of a surprise. Nearly 50 years later, the news that the band's reunion tour would end at the O2 Arena in London on 26 March 2022, and that this would be the last performance Genesis would ever give, would also have been known to the audience. Both announcements, then, set frames around the gigs that would conform to the respective audiences' expectations; more than this, they frame the gigs as types of narrative – as types of stories, shared and played out between the band and the crowd.

The two gigs, however, tell different types of story. In 1975, Gabriel announces something that has many of the attributes of a theatrical piece. *The Lamb* has a narrative (a phantasmagorical journey from 1970s New York through a succession of surreal netherworlds), and Gabriel acts out the stages of the story during the gig. In doing so, he moves in and out of the character of Rael, without ever approaching full performative investment. Rather, he gives the audience a series of shorthand clues – in clothing (a biker jacket and white t-shirt, or in one particularly striking transformation, a bloated, misshapen costume that all but obscures his identity) and physical mannerisms (the title song is delivered with the swagger one might expect from a street tough – or at least, from an English public schoolboy's idea of a street tough). The narrative's shifting locations are indicated through a sequence of slides, projected on three screens at the back of the stage. Dramatic moments – Rael enveloped by the Lamia or hurling a petrol bomb – are given an appropriately dramatic staging. At the same time, the gig is a gig, and it fulfils the audience's expectations of a gig; lighting is expressive and affective, the band divide into the expected configuration (Gabriel the dynamic frontperson, the other four the attentive musical

craftsmen), and it ends where gigs end, with old, familiar, crowd-pleasing material.³

For the band's fans, looking back on the event, the 1975 gig is framed by another narrative, drawn from the band's history. *The Lamb* tour was, in its own way, a farewell; Gabriel had told his band mates that he was leaving Genesis during the tour, and his departure was formally announced in August of that year. This reading, however, is only available in retrospect. The 2022 gig's narrative is, in an apparent contrast, entirely determined by what the audience at the event itself knows of its place in the band's history. It is the last one. The set list is similar to the sequence of tracks played when the band toured in 1992 and 2007, but in 2022 each song is being played, by this group, for the last time. Music that has defined Genesis from the early 1970s onwards ('I Know What I Like,' the guitar solo from 'Firth of Fifth,' hit singles like 'Invisible Touch' and 'I Can't Dance') becomes, in this performance, a palimpsest and summary of the more than 50-year history of the band. That history is also clearly etched on to the bodies of the performers. Phil Collins (who took over as the band's frontperson in 1975) is now frail and confined to a chair; the other long-term members, Mike Rutherford and Tony Banks, are white haired and slightly, but noticeably, stooped. Given the age of the band, moments that would have been relatively unremarkable on previous tours are freighted with significance. The instrumental break in 'I Know What I Like' routinely featured a moment of virtuoso slapstick, where Collins smashed a tambourine on his elbows, knees, feet, and forehead without dropping a beat. In the final gig, the fragile, seated Collins produces a tambourine from the stand next to his chair. He holds it up to the audience, who cheer, and he attempts a version of his usual routine, as best he can. The performance lasts a fraction of the time it used to, and at the end he gestures to the

audience, his arms outstretched, a resigned, amused look on his face. The cheer for this is louder, as though both Collins and the crowd are celebrating a small victory over time.

Performing narratives

Genesis on stage in 1975 and Genesis on stage in 2022 can, as the above discussion indicates, be thought of as complex, interweaving narratives; these narratives, in their turn, cross the boundaries between music, digital and analogue images, dramaturgy, design, performance, and reception. Even a show like *The Lamb* functions both as the retelling of an already known narrative (which exists in a different medium) and a conventionally presented Genesis performance, including costuming, expressive stage design, a bank of projected images, and so on. In other words, the shows tell stories, but the stories they tell are transmedial, and rather than constructing a single narrative, the performances create and inhabit storyworlds (that is, spaces determined not by one overarching narrative, but by the intersection of a number of interweaving narratives; for a fuller discussion, see below). Transmedial narratives were first defined and properly codified by Henry Jenkins in 2006; in *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins argued that the contemporary organisation of cultural information in effect created a new relation between consumers and the content they consumed. Cultural information circulated with a network of media systems, economies, and cultural frameworks, and was brought together not so much through the operation of new technologies, but through the active participation of those consumers motivated enough to track the information down. As Jenkins put it, ‘...convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content.’⁴ Jenkins argued that this shift

necessitated a reframing of the relation between the producers and the consumers of various types of media:

The term, participatory culture, contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands.⁵

As Jenkins is careful to note, this doesn't mean that consumers and producers have an equal share of cultural power. Corporations have more economic and social clout than the individual, and, within fandom, active consumers have an advantage over those who are more passive or only marginally interested. Nevertheless, the clear implication of Jenkins' argument was that the narratives that formed around and within popular cultural events were exercises in communal creation, as consumers and producers assembled material dispersed through different media into more or less coherent wholes. In what has proved to be a very influential formation, Jenkins termed these exercises in co-creation, transmedial storytelling.

As Thon (*Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media* Palgrave 2016) and Ellestrom (*Transmedial Narration: Narratives and Stories in Different Media* Palgrave 2019) have made clear, Jenkins' original formation has proved both endlessly generative and difficult to pin down. There are, now, simply so many media, and our access to all the channels through which information might arrive is greater and faster than it was at the time Jenkins devised the concept. As a partial response to this increased complexity, scholars such as Thon and Marie-Laure Ryan started to use the term 'storyworld':

The replacement of ‘narrative’ with ‘storyworld’ acknowledges the emergences of the concept of ‘world’ not only in narratology but also in the broader cultural scene. Nowadays we have not only multimodal representations of storyworlds that combine various types of signs and virtual online worlds that span multiple instalments and transmedial storyworlds that are deployed simultaneously across multiple media platforms, resulting in a media landscape in which creators and fans alike constantly expand, revise and even parody them.⁶

Storyworlds, for Thon and Ryan, were decentred narratives: interweaving stories drawn from and developed on multiple media platforms and used in multiple ways by both artists and consumers. The term captured a particular cultural moment – the point at which already existing franchises stopped cohering around a central narrative thread. In this moment, such narratives did not disappear; rather, they were dispersed. A franchise like *Star Trek*, for example, might have started off as one TV series, following one set of characters. By the 2010s, the *Star Trek* franchise spread across a number of TV shows on multiple platforms, films, books, comics, games, sites, discussion boards, social media communities, fan-generated fictions, and so on, and so on.⁷ One narrative thread has been replaced by multiple threads, none of which occupies an undisputedly central position in the development of the franchise.

As Mark Duffett suggests, the multiplicity and complexity of these threads make them particularly appealing to fans; fan communities are able to interact with (and to help create) the threads that form the particular storyworlds they favour. In fact, fan communities are brought together and strengthened precisely through the sharing of complex threads of narrative information:

Aided by the opportunities for social interaction offered by fan communities, seasoned fans can sustain their interests over long periods of time, never seeming to waver far from their paths. Time becomes marked for such individuals by each new experience *as a fan*. New passions, media technologies, releases, broadcasts, tours, practices and communities can all act as way stages marking different eras that come and go.⁸

Duffett argues that such interaction is a crucial part of a fan's self-identity, but it is also an integral part of an artist's self-identity, particularly as that self-identity is presented to the fanbase and the wider world. The subjectivity of the performer is confirmed for their audience through the interaction of all the narratives that, taken together, form a storyworld for both fans and performers. As Thon argues, this storyworld does not have to be internally consistent:

Indeed, it is quite frequently the case that narrative works successively represent situations that do not immediately 'add up' to a noncontradictory story world without providing a plausible external explanation for these apparent contradictions, leading to various contemporary narrative works being best described as representing compounds of two or three noncontradictory storyworlds.⁹

One can see this as a sign of the strength of a storyworld, rather than as a sign of its weakness. Inconsistency allows the individual fan, and groups of fans, a measure of control over the narrative; contradictions can be resolved, new narrative units can be inserted into the storyworld, pre-existing narratives can be revisited and reinterpreted, and so on, and so on.

The transmedial storyworlds described above are all comprised of entirely fictional material. In the performance of popular music, however (one might commonsensically point out), we are dealing with fans and artists who are inescapably real. The meanings attached, say, to Genesis' final performance in 2022 are bound up in what both fans and performers know of the history of the band, and the contexts that shaped that history. One could certainly argue that, in this case, some sections of the performance might count as exercises in transmedial narration. For example, Collins acts out the narratives implied in the songs in front of a complex, multimedia stage that reflects and supports those narrative; narratives whose reception is partly shaped by specialised fan knowledge, gained through access to the lyrics and to the sites where the song narratives are outlined and discussed. However, even given this, the narrative created by the performance relies for its impact on the fact that it is not to be taken as fictional; this really is the last time, and when each song finishes, Genesis will never play it again.

In 1975, though, the balance between the narratives that shape the performer's real and fictional selves is different. Here, we do have a complex system of narratives that could be more easily classed as a transmedial storyworld. The performance, overall, has a narrative shape, which can only be fully understood if the fan both listens attentively to Gabriel's onstage narration and has, ideally, read the extensive liner notes that accompanied *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*. That narrative is performed, but not consistently; Gabriel was the main character throughout, except for the moments when he steps outside the character and speaks to the audience in the measured, droll performative style that was by that time a key part of his performance persona, and which was, it could be said, itself at least partly fictional. Neither does the burden of telling the story fall

on Gabriel alone. The staging of the performance includes a set of three screens behind the musicians. During the course of the performance, the screens displayed nearly 1,500 slides, which required the use of seven projectors.¹⁰ The other band members' active involvement in the performance of the narrative is marginal at best. Collins momentarily becomes the central character's brother, but his main role is that of drummer and percussionist. The other members of the band create the music that sustains the narrative (and that music itself is shaped by the story), but otherwise they take no active role in the performance; they are simply there while the story happens. They are, though, arranged onstage in a configuration that fans of the band would recognise (Hackett seated stage right, then Rutherford, then Gabriel centre stage, then Collins, then Banks). Gabriel's performance takes place around the other band members – as though the fictional storyworld of *The Lamb* is superimposed on the real world of the band in performance. Looking at this performance, one might say that the narrative is as scenographically dispersed as the various personae discussed in [Chapter 5](#); the story is not told by one person, but by all of the elements the performances and staging employ.

In 2011, Fabian Holt argued that, in the first decades of the 21st century, music took what he described as a visual turn, driven largely by the fact that it was now easier for audiences to access all kinds of video content:

What I call the *visual turn* in music follows this explosion in user-generated content on YouTube and other sites... Music has been one of the most popular objects of communication in the digital age, and music has made the transition into the next major stage – namely, audiovisual convergence, with the penetration of video in music industry practices of production, communication and distribution. The video turn has a history within the music industry and not only in

general social media. Since around 2008, and a growing number of live music promoters have been producing and circulating video of live and recorded music on their respective platforms.^{[11](#)}

As more recent analyses of the relation between visual material and the production of music have clearly demonstrated (see, for example, Ana Sedeño-Valdellós and Ana Alicia Balbuena Morilla^{[12](#)} on Lil Nas X, of whom more below), the trend identified by Holt in the 2010s has both accelerated and become more closely integrated into the reception of music (as an example of this, one might cite the 2021 deal between Spotify and Giphy, the largest online GIF database, that allowed both sites to link to artists' gifs^{[13](#)}). However, as much of this book has already demonstrated, the visual turn Holt identifies is in some ways nothing new. One could say that, from the moment roughly in the mid-1960s when the visual components of live performance began to link to the visual material available to audiences, through album covers, music-press and general adverts, the earliest examples of bespoke music videos, we have lived in a musical environment that has been shaped by visual material that is designed to frame the artist and the band, and in doing so to create transmedial narratives. What has happened, in the past 20 or so years, is an acceleration of trends that were already embedded in the experience of receiving music. In live performance (an area of music that has, by necessity, to borrow from a range of images that the audience recognise as appropriate for the performance) the visual turn Holt describes predates the 21st century by at least three decades. This means, it could be argued, that since the 1960s, popular musicians on stage have inhabited transmedial storyworlds by default; and it also suggests that audiences are entirely familiar with, and, indeed, are primed to accept, the idea that each performance is an exercise in complex, intermedial narration. Versions of

the same narrative processes apply, whether someone is in the audience (or, indeed, whether they are on stage) for Genesis in 1975, or in 2022.

In the rest of this chapter, I will examine two recent tours (David Byrne's *American Utopia*, Lil Nas X's *Long Live Montero*). Each, it could be argued, is clearly an example of consciously shaped transmedial narratives; each plays on the narratives, past and present, surrounding the star figure; each makes reference to the visual iconographies that surround the star; both present a narrative that places the star in relation to their past, their present, and the culture that shapes them; and each consciously intersects with and comments on wider sociopolitical narratives, narratives to which, in each case, each one of the artists is, in their varying ways, opposed.

David Byrne: *American Utopia*

As a rippling keyboard motif starts to play, an elderly David Byrne is lifted into a standing position by his two backing singers, who then propel him across the stage. As the bassline kicks in, Byrne, caught in a spotlight, begins to talk to us as though we were the congregation and he is there to deliver a sermon. What he tells us suggests that we are in the midst of an all-embracing existential crisis; we might be in a shotgun shack, or in another part of the world, or behind the wheel of a large automobile, and, at some point or other, we might wind up asking ourselves how we got there. Even before the harangue begins, the audience at the Hudson Theatre in New York have already responded with the type of applause that signifies both recognition and approval. Not only is the song being performed ('Once in a Lifetime') familiar; the performance itself (or at least the broad outlines of the performance) is also known to, and understood by, the people watching. The track (from Talking Heads' fourth album, *Remain in Light* (1981)) was one of the band's biggest hits. Its release was accompanied by

a video, in which Byrne appeared, in a suit rather too tight even for his thin frame, wearing glasses with his hair slicked back, and performed the song as though he were a Southern Baptist preacher on the verge of losing control of himself. On what was to prove a document of the band's last live performances (Jonathan Demme's concert film *Stop Making Sense*, in 1984), Byrne effectively reprised this role, edging the preacher persona even closer to a total breakdown. His body shuddered; his hair, face, and clothes were soaked in sweat; at the song's climax, his body bent backwards as though forced down by an invisible hand. At the Hudson Theatre, Byrne might look like an older version of the type: a fatherly Baptist, rather than a charismatic Pentecostal. Otherwise, he looks much the same – still slim, still wearing the grey suit he wore in the earlier incarnation, still, at the song's end, bent backwards by the same invisible hand.

The Hudson Theatre residency ran from 4 October 2019 to 16 February 2020, but the material and the style of presentation had already been thoroughly road-tested on tour in 2018. The tour, the residency, and the subsequent concert film were given the name *American Utopia*, and as the Hudson Theatre performances made abundantly clear, the title was an intentional reference not only to the idea of the US as a potentially ideal nation, but also to the current political situation in the country. Asked in 2021 whether the album and subsequent tour were responses to the rise of authoritarian Republicanism and racial violence in the US in the mid-2010s, Byrne answered:

Yeah. I just felt like it was in the air. It might've been Trump. I think I was planning the tour and doing my last record, sort of working on that, before that election. I think I had a feeling that this was a moment, we're still in that moment, where the country is fracturing, all these curtains being pulled back, a lot of ugliness is starting to emerge,

and I thought, “We can’t just do a feel-good show the whole time. We can do parts of it that are feel-good and everybody’s going to dance.” But I thought, “We have to acknowledge, at least, the world that we’re living in, the moment we’re living in. Not that we’re going to fix it, but we have to acknowledge it.”¹⁴

Acknowledging the moment, in the show itself, took a number of different forms: voter registration booths were set up in the venue; information about voting patterns (at one point 20% of the audience are illuminated, to illustrate the fact that only 20% of US voters participate in local elections); Byrne and the band performed Janelle Monáe’s ‘Hell You Talmbout,’ updating the lyrics to include the names of recent Black American victims of police brutality. For the most part, however, the show’s politics were presented less overtly; they were integrated both into the structure of the show and into its staging; and in both cases, the performative choices made by Byrne and his creative team were either overtly or by implication transmedial, linked to images and narratives not only associated with Byrne himself, but with the artistic environment in which he worked.

American Utopia is far more of a conventional piece of theatre than any of the other shows discussed so far. It takes place in a Broadway theatre; the audience are seated, as they would be for a play; Byrne, from the first, is our narrator, guiding us through the developing story, and making sure that, at the evening’s end, all the narrative threads are woven together into a clear, satisfying conclusion. But the stage, unusually, is bare. When the performance begins, Byrne is seated at a table in a square of light centre stage, but very soon even that disappears, and the only other piece of stage furniture the show uses is a lampstand, which illuminates the stage during ‘Bullet,’ before sliding offstage, apparently under its own volition. Neither are there the usual appurtenances of a gig: no drumkit, no mic stands or

pedalboards, no keyboards or amplification. Instead, the bare stage is populated by musicians, 12 of them, all playing portable instruments, and moving in carefully choreographed sequence. In the introduction to 'Every Day Is a Miracle,' Byrne explains the reason for this to the audience:

As you can see, we don't have any cables or wires attaching to us in these shows, attaching to gear or equipment or any of those kinds of things. We're completely untethered. We can go wherever we like on the stage. It's very liberating. When I began to think about the show, I realised that, well, what we humans like looking at the most is, yeah, other humans. More than a bicycle, more than a beautiful sunset, and probably more than a bag of potato chips. (laughter). So I thought about the show and I wondered, what if we could eliminate everything from the stage except the stuff we care about the most? What would be left? Well, it would be us. Us, and you. And that's what the show is.¹⁵

The musicians are themselves humanly various, drawn from a variety of different cultures and parts of the world; each one wears the same grey suit as Byrne. This means that, as the performance unfolds, Byrne can at points disappear into the ensemble – no longer the star, but simply another musician. This chimes with one of the ostensible themes of the show, that human beings are unique, infinitely variable, and equally worthy of scrutiny. However, the staging of this theme rests on a paradox. Technology seems to have disappeared from the stage, but even though it is hidden, it is omnipresent. For one thing, as Byrne and the musicians demonstrate, all the music is produced by the musicians, live on stage, and producing that music relies on a complex network of technological systems.¹⁶ Moreover, the technology (which governs both the music and the lighting) is integrated, to a greater extent than is normal, into the costuming of the musicians. Pete

Keppler, in an interview with *ProSound* in 2018, gives a clear idea of just how closely the performers and the technology are bound together:

For a non-audio example, we use a lighting system called BlackTrax. The performers each have infrared emitters built into the shoulders of their suits. Those emitters are read by special cameras up in the grid, and that info allows BlackTrax to enable the standard moving lights to act as automatic follow-spots, tracking the people around the stage. Some performers may have as many as seven transmitters and receivers on them, for mics, in-ear monitors and BlackTrax.^{[17](#)}

In other words, it could be said that the audience are looking simultaneously at bare, unadorned performers, and at performative cyborgs, swathed in cutting-edge technologies, without which the show would be impossible.

Given Byrne's performance history, such a radical reworking of the stage is extreme, but not in itself unexpected. During his career, he has reconfigured his music for salsa bands and for brass ensembles; he has appeared in a variety of different costumes, and there are Instagram reels devoted to his idiosyncratic dance moves. The radical, stripped-back staging of *American Utopia*, therefore, fits neatly into the narrative the audience brings with them to the Hudson Theater. After all, *Stop Making Sense* starts with a man in a grey suit, on a bare stage, using portable technology to produce music. *American Utopia* merely extends the opening image of the earlier performance over the length of the show. In doing so, however, it sets up another series of transmedial connections. The show, after the 2018 tour, settles into a residency in a New York theatre – a theatre world that Byrne knows, and is to an extent a part of. He has collaborated with the dancer and choreographer Twyla Tharp (on *The Catherine Wheel*,

in 1981), and he provided incidental music for the avant-garde director Robert Wilson's opera *the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down* (1984: Byrne provided music for 12 brief linking sections, described by Wilson as knee plays). *American Utopia*'s choreography nods to Tharp, particularly in the neatly organised ungainliness of 'I Zimbra' or 'I Dance Like This.'¹⁸ It also links to Robert Wilson. A defining feature of Wilson's theatre is the use of light as a means of structuring stage space and as a narrative element in its own right (in *Einstein on the Beach*, for example, a bar of light slowly rises from the horizontal to the vertical, and slowly moves upwards, disappearing into the flies of the theatre). During *American Utopia*, light provides squares into which the musicians move (in 'Don't Worry About the Government,' or a slowly advancing solid rectangle, moving across the stage space, in 'I Should Watch TV'). Byrne's monologues are identifiably in the same performative mode as those of Laurie Anderson (another artist noted for performances that include intricate choreography and new musical technologies) and Spalding Gray (a founder member of the New York avant-garde company The Wooster Group).

The precise relation between *American Utopia* and the New York theatrical avant-garde might not be apparent to every audience member in the Hudson Theater, but (it is safe to assume) the idea that Byrne is linked to the New York avant-garde is a prominent part of the narrative that surrounds his work. Talking Heads formed at the same time, and in the same city, that housed Wilson, Anderson, Gray, and all the other key practitioners of the theatrical avant-garde. They themselves were part of an artistic movement that was based at first in New York. American Punk was an overtly artistic movement, embracing the patronage of Andy Warhol, referencing (inter alia) Pop Art, Verlaine, and Dada. Byrne, a musician

extensively connected from the beginning of his career with New York's history of experimental art, presented in *American Utopia* a show that could not help but be read as addition to his, and to New York's, history of experimental performance.

Therefore, the ostensible narrative of *American Utopia* – that, in opposition to the times, the true American Utopia is inclusive, integrated, and focussed not on abstractions but on the infinite varieties of the human body – is overlaid by another narrative: that of the risk-taking, surprising, ground-breaking artist, returning to the home of risk-taking, surprising, ground-breaking art. And overlaid over both of those narratives, there is the fact that *American Utopia* as a performance exists in close, unmissable dialogue with its predecessor, *Stop Making Sense*. I've already noted some of the similarities above, and there are others – and the audience recognises them. For example, at the beginning of the show Byrne lists a series of fundamental questions that the growing human comes to ask themselves: 'Who am I?' 'What do I want?' 'How do I work this?' This last question is greeted with audience laughter, because it is, of course, a lyric from 'Once in a Lifetime,' and to make the reference unmissable Byrne reprises one of the signature moves from the video, one that he also uses in *Stop Making Sense*. Here, the backing vocalists manipulate his limbs into position; one extends Byrne's left forearm, and the other brings Byrne's right hand down on it, miming chopping the forearm into sections. Even if the opening of the show had not echoed the opening of the earlier film, a moment like this would be enough to activate another intermedial narrative – this time with one of the most famous performance narratives in Byrne's history.

Stop Making Sense casts an unignorable shadow over Talking Heads' and Byrne's creative output. Routinely hailed as a classic from the moment of its release, in 1984 it won the National Society of Film Critics award for

best non-fiction film, and the critic Leonard Maltin described it as ‘one of the greatest rock movies ever made.’¹⁹ Over and above the dynamism of the performances, *Stop Making Sense*’s impact relies on a simple staging trick. As the gig goes on, the road crew build the stage around the performers. The first song, ‘Psycho Killer,’ is played by Byrne on acoustic, with a ghetto blaster providing the rhythm; then, for each succeeding song, something is added – black blocks, containing equipment and instruments, are wheeled on, the musicians arrive – first one by one, and then in groups of two and three, a black backdrop is lowered, masking the back of the stage. The camera doesn’t try to disguise these transitions; in many shots the stage crew in the wings are clearly visible, and they remain active until the concert’s end, positioning lights at the side of the stage. The staging already implies a narrative: individual musicians forming themselves into a coherent, cohesive unit, and, given that Byrne’s performance is given the greatest prominence, he becomes, almost by default, the narrative’s chief protagonist. In the 1980s, Byrne was frequently described in interview as distant and socially awkward (he later diagnosed himself as autistic), and the opening moments of *Stop Making Sense* play to this awkwardness. Byrne stands at the microphone, his head jerking in time to the music; at the end of the track, the rhythm breaks down, and the rupture sends Byrne stumbling across the stage. From there, the narrative shows Byrne’s gradual incorporation into the community of the band. His movements become more fluid (although they never come close to the spontaneity of the other performers) and the musicians join him in moments of choreographed movement. And, crucially, as the first part of the performance (up to the track ‘Life During Wartime’) plays out, he frees himself of the confines of the grey suit, shedding the jacket, opening the top button, untucking the shirt from the trousers. When he comes on stage towards the end of the

show in a comically exaggerated version of the suit, he treats it playfully, revelling in the fact that he has to exaggerate his movements to make the jacket's arms move.

Stop Making Sense tells a story, of the incorporation of the alienated individual into the functioning group, and it does so both through the performances and the staging. *American Utopia* tells a parallel story; and, although Byrne denied a direct connection,²⁰ the presence of the grey suits on stage suggested a strong link with the earlier show – a link that was explicitly made by *The New York Times*²¹ and *The New Yorker*.²² At the beginning of the performance, we meet an older, less distant, more settled Byrne, but as the show progresses, the older Byrne invokes the younger Byrne, setting the figure we encounter in *Stop Making Sense* in context. After the first song, when Byrne mentions the questions we begin to ask ourselves, he says that we look at humanity and find ourselves ‘wondering if there’s ... you know, wondering if there’s a logic to it. Wondering if it’s supposed to make some kind of sense.’ In other spoken sections, Byrne returns to the theme. After ‘Lazy,’ he tells the audience ‘meeting people is hard ... but I know we have to do it,’ and then playfully goes on to divide up the audience into those who met on apps and those who don’t need apps. But, he says, ‘meanwhile, I’m, well, you know, observing. Trying to figure this out.’ Later, he tells us that he bought a TV with the proceeds of his first record deal, because ‘I saw the TV as being a kind of window, and I would see the hopes and dreams and aspirations and foibles of my fellow Americans.’ Such moments hark back to the disconnected Byrne of *Stop Making Sense*. The show’s staging, and Byrne’s more relaxed performance style, give the signal that in the performance at least, that disconnection is in the past. *American Utopia*’s narrative, therefore, not only links to all of the experimental performance narratives that were part of New York when

Byrne was young, but also extends the narrative of *Stop Making Sense*. In the early shows, a disconnected man was brought into community, forging links with the group forming around him. In *American Utopia*, that movement extends outward, beyond the isolated individual, to the performers, the audience, and the fragmented society outside of the Hudson Theatre.

Lil Nas X: *Long Live Montero*

In 2021, the rapper Lil Nas X was riding a second wave of popular cultural visibility. In 2019, his first single ‘Old Town Road’ (a rap over a track by the Dutch producer YoungKio that ran a country-inflected Nine Inch Nails sample over trap beats) was a substantial hit, due both to the quality of the track itself and to the fact it spawned a viral craze; the #yeehaw challenge on TikTok, which was part of an online marketing campaign largely organised by Nas himself, using his knowledge of and experience in social media. ‘Old Town Road’ and its many remixes were, for a time, ubiquitous and controversial. It was removed from the Country charts, and though the reasons for its removal were heavily debated at the time, it is fair to assume that the racial assumptions built into the genres of Country and Rap played a part in the ban. At the height of the track’s success, Lil Nas X came out as gay (via a post on Twitter). His next major cycle of releases (the album *Montero* and its related singles) referenced his queerness unambiguously. The video for ‘MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)’ opened with a declaration (‘In life, we hide the parts of ourselves we don’t want the world to see. We lock them away. We tell them no. We banish them. But here, we don’t. Welcome to Montero’), and followed Nas as he fell from the Garden of Eden down into Hell, where he lap danced for the Devil, before breaking Satan’s neck and taking his place.

As Lauron Kehrer has pointed out,²³ Lil Nas X was by no means the first or only queer artist in rap. ‘Montero,’ however, was a very overt declaration of gay identity, in a genre where queer artists had tended to be treated as unrepresentative, or marginal, or whose sexuality has been effectively effaced. Understandably, therefore, ‘MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)’ the single, *MONTERO* the album, and the *Long Live Montero* tour established the rapper as an icon and a role model for queer fans. In interviews conducted at the time, Nas showed both that he was aware of this and that, in some ways, the attention, though welcome, was confining:

Here he is, a young gay black man, days shy of his 22nd birthday, with a single atop the Billboard charts, talking openly about going on a date with another guy. Despite the singularity of his existence, the younger fans who’ve shared stories of coming out because of him on TikTok, or older LGBT fans, like me, who wish that they’d had a figure like him in their youth, he is not, he tells me — despite my insistence — looking to be anyone’s “role model.”

“At first I felt a sense of responsibility,” he says. “But now I kind of just don’t care. It’s not my job. Of course I want to spread good ideals, but I’m not nobody’s parents. At the end of the day I’m just doing me, and hoping everybody else is following the lead, and doing themselves.”²⁴

This hesitant response is understandable, and not simply because Nas had relatively recently made a very significant part of his private identity public. At the time of ‘MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)’s release, he was only 22, and one of the points insisted on in the tour documentary (*Long Live Montero*) is that the artist was still coming to terms with his own queer identity, and with the fact that it was public knowledge. Given that,

statements such as ‘I’m just doing me’ can be read, not as a demonstration of selfishness, but as a necessary part of identity formation.

And indeed, it could be said that *MONTERO* the album, and both the short *Long Live Montero* tour (Sept–Nov 2022) and the later documentary, had already established a clear enough sense of Nas’ identity both for his fans and for himself. The live show in particular was structured as a coming-out story, taking Nas from childhood, through success and his self-identification as gay, to the fraught reception of the ‘MONTERO’ video (the religious imagery in particular upset Christian right-wing commentators and Republican politicians, notably Kristi Noem, then the governor of South Dakota, and later Donald Trump’s Secretary of Homeland Security²⁵), ending with a celebratory embrace of overt, inclusive gendered and sexual identities. In other words, the show told a story that would already be well-known to Nas’ fans, and whose structure was replicated widely elsewhere. The coming-out narrative is a cultural staple, in TV, novels, films, plays, real-life memoirs; there are versions of it in all forms of narrative media. However, what marks out *MONTERO* the album, and especially *Long Live Montero* the tour, is that the narrative it contains was itself already fully transmedial – and that the performances demonstrated that Nas was fully aware of this. In fact, it could be said that the story the show told took as its subject the very fact that Nas’ life had already become a transmedial narrative – and the nature of that transmedial narrative (conducted online over a number of years) explained, not just the structure, but the ethos and the *mise-en-scene* of the live show.

As Ng and Gamble have pointed out (2024), the influence of social media on the music industry has been profound:

Since the early 2010s, Internet media platforms have disrupted a range of traditional music industry sectors, especially music

consumption... The declining popularity of physical sales formats in favour of on-demand streaming has seen information technology become the ‘most powerful sectoral force shaping how music and culture are mediated and experienced’ (Hesmonhaugh and Meier 2018: 1555). Indeed, one of the most noteworthy shifts in the last two decades has been a transition from what we call, admittedly as shorthand for complex media ecosystem, the ‘traditional’ model of music consumption...²⁶

As the ‘traditional’ models (and I would agree that the inverted commas are merited; the term traditional covers a wide range of industry practices) have changed, the position of the artist in relation to the narratives that surround him or her has also, necessarily, been transformed. To go back to Duffett’s argument, made above, the audience’s access to the storyworld that surrounds the star is both far greater and far more diffuse.²⁷ The star, in the social media ecosystem, is at the centre of an unbounded network of narratives, and those narratives are themselves taken up and used by people who may, for a variety of reasons, be engaged in similar acts of self-narration. This process can be affirmative, as fans see the development of the star’s narrative as a form of validation for their own narratives, and it can be negative, as the narrative created by and around the star meets opposition from other, strongly embedded cultural narratives. It could be said that there is nothing new in this. Popular musicians have excited both close identification and strong rejection for as long as the form has existed. Social media, however, both speeds this process up and magnifies its impacts. For example: ‘MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)’ was released on the 26th March 2021. By the 31st March, the video had racked up 34 million views on YouTube, and Nas’ name trended on Twitter on the days after the single’s release.²⁸ As we have seen, the online dissemination of

material plays an important part in the formation and maintenance of contemporary fanbases (see the discussion of K-pop above). It also plays a crucial role in the public, transmedial narration of the performer's self.

Social media, therefore, acts as a forcing house for popular cultural narratives, and those narratives proliferate (and escape the control of the artist, or of an interested party or grouping) extremely quickly. In Lil Nas X's case, both the track 'MONTERO' and the accompanying video would have excited comment at any point in popular music history (indeed, it is likely that both would previously have been subject to outright bans, which would, themselves, have become part of the subsequent transmedial narratives that shaped the future reception of the artists and the track), but both the dissemination of those narratives, and the sheer speed and range of their impact, would have taken far longer to evolve and to become widely established. In Nas' case, the social media narratives that proliferated around both 'Old Town Road' and 'Montero' were themselves partially shaped by the artist's own social media presence. As a teenager, he posted short-format comedy clips on Facebook and Vine; he also started a Nicki Minaj fan account on Twitter (which had to be relaunched, after Twitter suspended the original account). Although the following he accrued on social media was by no means as large as his musical fanbase, he did place a version of himself in the public domain, even though, as he subsequently noted, it was in many ways an idealised representation given his personal circumstances at the time:

But while his posts earned him a devoted following online, out in the real world, his circumstances felt grim: he was in the process of dropping out of college and frequently fighting with his parents. "It was like, I'm able to go viral, but I'm not promoting anything that's gonna help me," he says. "Until music came along."²⁹

Nas' social media presence was, therefore, a first attempt to create a version of himself that was both successful (he tweeted on December 16th 2018, 'I am not rich and famous yet/twitter do ya thing')³⁰ and also under his control. But the nature of social media itself militated against that control. When 'Old Town Road' became successful, journalists started to investigate the rapper's past, and uncovered the Nicki Minaj fandom account noted above.

"It's like a big misunderstanding and it's not one that I even want to give the time, because I'm never putting someone as the face of my career," he explained. "So I don't even speak on it. I just don't even acknowledge it, really. I know even more things are being made up and they're gonna be out there. It is disappointing when a big blog will post something without me talking about it but, I mean, it happens."³¹

This entirely understandable response suggests two things. First of all, it has always been the case that the star's persona, at some point, escapes the artist's and their management's control. However, this process preceded Nas' fame, and material about his life was already widely publicly available (and therefore the moment when his persona was visible enough to pass into public ownership arrived far more quickly than it would have done in previous decades). Secondly, it suggests that Nas was aware that the persona projected by his already existing presence online might pose problems. The response, quoted above, is both assertive – calling out blogs for posting information about him without discussing it – and at the same time evasive; it is a refusal to speak, not a denial.

In Nas' case (as the artist later made clear in a May 2020 tweet, he initially denied ownership of the feed because admitting to being a fan of Minaj carried with it the implication that he was gay), a pre-existing social

media presence, although useful in promoting his work, itself presented a complex narrative that the artist had to negotiate. In other words, Nas' use and knowledge of social media, while a necessary precondition of his success, was also of a piece with the way that social media is used in society more generally, as a form of transmedial identity formation, in a publicly accessible environment over which the individual cannot exercise complete control. As Biscaldi and Matera note, the impact of social media on identity formation has been significant, for those sections of society who are used to presenting themselves online, and one of its effects has been to collapse any simple distinction between online and offline spaces:

Does the identarian value of digital platforms transform the social and cultural worlds we all live in? Or do we transform social media, bending them to our concerns?... This question is resolved by ... technology 2.0, a kind of technology that is ever closer to users, platforms where we can 'act' more: social media which are complementary to and 'interface' with an enormous assortment of 'objects' (mobile technology and file sharing systems). Smartphones and tablets on the one hand, platforms (musical platforms for instance) on the other hand, expand 'digital culture', make it closer, more familiar, demand that we become increasingly at ease with practices and instruments, so that the boundary between online and offline activities is torn down...[32](#)

Biscaldi and Matera argue (correctly, it seems to me) that one of the key features of contemporary social media use is its proximity to the individual, and the haptic, responsive nature of the material and technologies that shape our interaction with it. We don't have to go to a particular location to use the media; we don't have to limit ourselves to a particular form of address,

or a particular mode or tone of address. The technologies are eternally available to us, and the self-identifying narratives we create on social media are eternally in flux, eternally contingent, and explicitly transmedial – formed from text, images, gifs, links to other sites, other stories, other images, or pieces of music. On top of this, the algorithms governing social media will ensure that material that is striking, or on a topic of general or specific interest, will be promoted; the whole purpose of an algorithm is to match content with an audience (while, at the same time, enabling the platform to monetise that content). An astute user of social media can, therefore, do two things simultaneously. They can create a persona online that draws in an audience, and they can use that persona to help launch marketing campaigns for their work. But algorithms, by their nature, act to remove content from the content creator, sending it out across the site as a discrete, context-light piece of information, and the person who posted the content has little control over where it goes, who sees it, and what use they make of it.

Lil Nas X proved adept at employing the playful, funny social media he had crafted for himself before ‘Old Town Road’ in developing the various memes and viral postings that created the initial audience for the track and for him. He did so, moreover, at a point in his life when the process of individual identity formation is perhaps at its most foundational – in adolescence, when the individual begins to shape an adult self. At this point in the individual’s life, social media use provides what Lavinia Marin has termed the possibility of self-transformation. She argues that this transformation happens through the interaction of two pressures. The first is the kind of formative pressure that is part of any social space (all social spaces have their own norms and rules, enabling but constraining individual

expression). The second derives from the fact that social media platforms allow for the curation of the self:

[When] we promote a certain narrative about ourselves through social media posts by performing a self with certain values (such as a sustainable lifestyle, minimalist, healthy, expertise, etc., this identity tends to become inescapable for the one performing it online because there are always traces left of this identity with which the user can be later confronted by others... If I promote myself as an expert in nutrition and healthy diets in my videos, and if I gain a wide follower base through this persona, it becomes hard to distance myself from this identity because I would lose my followers and the online prestige.³³

For the adroit poster, social media promises both the formal boundaries of any meeting place, and the freedom that distance and partial invisibility give, but at the same time, there are consequences if those boundaries are breached, and the freedom to create a persona is itself limited by the audience's expectations for that persona.

On social media, therefore, the individual is able to craft a persona, albeit one that operates within constraints; there is no doubt that Lil Nas X took advantage of this, both in crafting his own persona and in using his online presence as a useful means of publicising and promoting his music. However, as his initial hesitation over owning his role in the Nicki Minaj fan feed suggests, he was understandably wary about some of the implications of the persona he created. Bates, Hobman, and Bell (2020) give a very useful account of the use to which LGBTQ+ adolescents make use of social media platforms. What they find is that, for this group, social media use allows individuals both to self-fashion and to connect with other LGBTQ+ social media users:

The anonymity and pseudonymity (e.g. exploration of social media without evidence of visitation) the Internet can provide, paired with the disinhibition ...and ubiquitous nature of daily public online communication, increase opportunities to experiment with unexplored aspects of the self, without risk of stigma....³⁴

This, though, does not mean that social media is a safe space for LGBTQ+ adolescents. It is subject to the constraints outlined above:

Adolescents are required to manage the ongoing process of identity presentation both linearly across time and latterly across multiple often overlapping network profiles, with differing norms, expectations, and audiences... This process is made even more complex when individuals do not fit neatly into well-understood categories and can make the task of identity self-definition and realignment even more complicated.³⁵

As they go on to point out, for LGBTQ+ youth, the stakes in negotiating the social media landscape correctly are raised; in many cases, the online persona precedes the moment where the individual comes out to their family and friends, and the real-life environment in which they find themselves might be one in which it is difficult, or dangerous, to declare one's sexual or gender identity openly.³⁶

Long Live Montero is, as I've noted above, a clear retelling of Lil Nas X's life up to and including the furore around the album and its lead single. What marks it out, and what I would argue determines the staging and structure of the show, is the complex nature of the transmedial narrative that has shaped both the artist and the material. In *American Utopia*, David Byrne's performance can be seen as a reckoning with the awkwardness of

his younger self, and with the culture that shaped both his art and his view of the world. In *Long Live Montero*, Nas is also reckoning with his past self, but the timeframe is different (his past is that much closer to his present) and the presentation of his identity has been diffused through a number of different outlets, in a process that began before he was famous. The stage show (which is relatively short, for a headlining gig; somewhere between one and one and a quarter hours) has, as Nas puts it, a clear narrative structure:

I knew that I wanted to do something like theatrical, and like a play. I didn't know the best way to go about doing it. And Saul [Levitz. [producer] and Hodo [Musa, costume designer], thankfully, my life savers, um, gave me, like, the concept of the tour. It's this kid that enters a completely new world, adjusts to the new world, and then, you know, becomes sure of himself. And then the cycle, kind of, ends, and like starts again. And I feel like that's exactly where we are right now.^{[37](#)}

And the division of the material reflects this. The show is clearly structured as a bildungsroman, taking Nas and the audience through the artist's early years, his first brush with fame, the moment of coming out (and forming relationships), dealing with the demands that come with fame and with the controversies surrounding 'MONTERO,' and ending with a short coda in which Nas, the narrative suggests, faces his post-Montero future. This narrative is reinforced by the titles chosen for each section (Act One: Rebirth; Act Two: Transformation; Act Three: Rebirth: End of the Beginning). However, as I will argue below, this apparently linear, protagonist-centred narrative is rendered more complex (and more

obviously transmedial) by the style of its presentation – and in particular (as with Byrne), by the mise-en-scene that frames the show.

Long Live Montero starts with an image, projected on curtains that mask the stage. A woman (Hodo Musa, credited by Nas with help in developing the concept for the show) tells us that, in the midst of the universe, there is a special place (Earth) and it is full of special creatures (human beings, or as she tells the audience directly, ‘you’), whose souls have traversed the cosmos to be here. We will follow one of these special souls; we’ll discover how he found music, and how his music found us. Her image fades, and then, abruptly, Nas’ silhouette appears, large enough to fill the frame of the stage. The curtains part, and Nas, in person, launches into ‘Panini,’ the opening track. The stage is bare, apart from a row of steps placed in front of the largest of three video screens; the other two are positioned on each side of the large screen, angled slightly so as to enclose the main performance space. These screens carry images throughout nearly all of the show; they take us from swirling nebulae, to stylised images of Nas’ neighbourhood and his childhood home, through lavish ballrooms and gardens, live action religious meetings, where the preacher (played by Nas) warns against temptation, through hell, locker rooms and gyms, and finally back into space – each one representing a stage in Nas’ development.

The show ran, almost exclusively, from timecodes rather than live cueing (Luke Rolls, the lighting designer, noted that there were only six cues in the show³⁸). The lighting was carefully balanced to ensure that neither the video images nor the live performers predominated. In performance, this meant that Nas and the troupe of male dancers who performed with him were carefully blended into the images on screens. To take an example: Nas is spotlit during ‘Old Town Road,’ but the spotlight beam blends into the twilight sky – so rather than isolating him, the spotlight helps to integrate

him into the stage image. This happens throughout; at no point does Nas step away from the *mise-en-scene*; and at no point does the physical performance reduce the screens to backdrops. *Long Live Montero*, in other words, reaches the same endpoint as *American Utopia*, even if it takes a very different route. In both shows, technology has two functions – firstly, to facilitate the narrative, and secondly, to integrate all the elements of the performance together, into a coherent, meaningful world. For Byrne, this is a world in which the (apparently) unadorned individual is the central focus; for Nas, it is a world of dizzying transformations – an attempt to recreate the sugar rush of fame as well as a search for the artist’s self.

Long Live Montero, then, is a maximal companion to *American Utopia*’s minimalism, but the maximal unfolding of its *mise-en-scene*, and the rapid switches between exaggerated reality, parody, fantasy, and science fiction, creates a performance environment that is entirely familiar to Nas and his fans. As Westrup noted in 2023, the visual material Nas produced from the beginning of his career is a hybrid of differing genres, conventions, and visual styles:

...“Old Town Road’s” genre bending is ... crucial to its articulation of queer masculinity. In his music videos, Nas has experimented widely with genre from sci-fi (“Panini”), to jail break narrative and prison sexploitation film (“Industry Baby”), to fantasy/mythology/biblical epic (“MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)”). Like Kenneth Anger before him, Nas often plays these popular genres against the grain: see, for example, the Brokeback Mountain-esque gay Western sex scene in “That’s What I Want.”³⁹

In other words, Nas’ visual identity is founded on transformation, and on the reconfiguration of generic information. For Kathrin Dreckmann, these

reconfigurations are themselves attempts to destabilise those iconographies that characterise Western patriarchal culture; writing about the complex visual symbolism in the ‘MONTERO’ video, she points out:

It is remarkable that a queer Black man adopts white metaphors of queen and king at this point, mediating between gender, race, and class with the help of the phantasmagoria of Heaven and Hell – as well as the appropriation of Platonic philosophical history and fashion theory reworked in terms of the history of clothing. The level of reflection not only refers to a panoramic view of a reflective canonization process narrowed in cultural and philosophical history; the view also adopts a multiplicity of media... On all levels, Lil Nas X highlights the exclusion of intersectional or queer gay love in representations of Hollywood cinema, philosophy, art, and Christian iconography.⁴⁰

This is an astute reading, and it is one that can be extended, not only to other Lil Nas videos, but also to other pieces of visual material – the clips that spool on repeat on Spotify, album artwork, videos on TikTok and Instagram, teasers and trailers on YouTube, and so on. And it is an argument that makes sense of the staging of *Long Live Montero*. It transfers the logic of the *MONTERO* video on to the stage; both the costuming and the images are examples of the ‘reflective canonisation process’ Dreckmann describes. It follows the narrative of Nas’ life, but refracts it through a bewilderingly eclectic, playful, and teasingly camp kaleidoscope of images. In doing so, it acts as an extension of Nas’ online persona: constantly ironic, always self-aware, an invitation to the viewer to play along, and not to take the information at face value.

As an example, we might take the moment in the show that stages the moment of Nas’ first success. We have moved from intergalactic space

(‘Panini’) to US suburbia (‘Tales of Dominica’), through an upstairs window into Nas’ bedroom. However, the images that appear on the screen bear little relation to a real bedroom. It is of a piece with the hyperbolic settings for the previous tracks – the multicoloured psychedelic star fields of ‘Panini,’ or the pink and purple neighbourhood of ‘Tales’ (with giant planets clearly visible above the line of the hills). The bedroom depicted in ‘Sun Goes Down’ is a mixture of Disney Princess and Louis Quinze, and the colour scheme picks up on the dominant tones of ‘Tales,’ adding fixtures (lampshades, mirrors, chairs) edged with gold, floating just above the floor. At the song’s end, Nas leaves the stage, and Tinkerbell, apparently, flies in through the open window, to the accompaniment of a harp and a flute. Tinkerbell hovers in the centre of the room, then flies towards the audience – revealing itself as a virtual representation of Nas, bedecked with iridescent butterfly wings and a toga. We cut to a table, covered in paper and books, a hairbrush, an elegant white and gold teapot and cup, and a Fabergé egg. Nas-as-Tinkerbell, his toga now lilac, balances on a pile of papers for an instant, and then spins, transforming as he does so into a mobile phone – and we move straight into the real-life viral campaign that helped drive the success of ‘Old Town Road.’ The screens become mobile screens; the images move, as though someone is scrolling between sites and entering content; and the screens become a collage, of posts, images, clips, vines, videos, and news stories. A sharp transition takes us to the desert (with Ennio Morricone playing), and finally to a neon-lit city framed by dunes; and at that point, Nas re-enters, leading the large puppet horse mentioned above.

The narrative structure is clear, but, one might say, it is so obvious as to be beside the point. The story is so well-known to Nas and his audience as to be able to carry a wealth of ironised images and references. At the

beginning, Nas is a lonely teenager, in his room, depressed to the point of being suicidal, escaping into social media (the track contains the lyric ‘Stannin Nicki into dawn / Only place I felt like I belonged’⁴¹), and simultaneously a version of Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty, in a Disney bedroom, dreaming of escape; then he is Tinkerbell crossed with a Roman senator, and then he is a phone – and we move from elaborate fantasy to reality, and then back to fantasy. The moment works both because the images fit the narrative and are familiar enough, from other media, for the audience to recognise them, but they are presented in the knowing, half-parodic style of the artist’s already-established social media presence. The narrative is a transmedial collage: an ironised assemblage of exaggerated, knowingly chosen images, drawn from the common experience of the artist and the audience, and mediated through screens (which mirror the technologies through which Nas first presented himself in public). Byrne’s narrative relies on the audience’s diachronic understanding of his own history; Nas’ narrative relies on the audience’s synchronic understanding both of his life, and the culture that surrounds him. Byrne’s is a simple narrative, told wittily on an apparently simple stage; Nas’ is a narrative assembled from as much cultural information as can be fitted around the story, and exaggerated, with the ironical playfulness that has already come to define his interaction with the wider world.

Conclusion

The various narratives described above do not end when the performances end. After the end of the tour, the show’s narrative takes its place in the wider transmedial narrative of the artist’s or the band’s life. *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* has a life independent of Genesis the band; it now exists, from time to time, as a stage piece recreated (as far as is possible) by

various tribute bands.⁴² Genesis' last gig is now available, in its entirety, online; in the YouTube comments, fans blend the show into the narratives they share with the band, recalling past gigs and album purchases.⁴³ *American Utopia* helped re-establish David Byrne as the grandfather of American Indie. *Long Live Montero* marked something of a high point in Lil Nas X's career; subsequent actions – a controversy over his role in a range of footwear,⁴⁴ the 'J. Christ' single and its accompanying video, and the relative failure of subsequent releases – rapidly diminished his popularity. In each case, the inherently transmedial narratives spill over from the performance space into the network of wider narratives that accrue to the musicians, to the genres, to the audiences, to the venues, and to the wider culture surrounding the performance. There are routes through this complexity; Byrne relies on the history that he has with at least part of each audience, and Nas relies on the audience's awareness of what constitutes self-presentation on social media. In each case, the narrative is not singular or linear; it is multi-stranded – woven together from all the unfinishable, transmedial narratives that form around any cultural artefact and any culturally visible artist.

Notes

1. Peter Gabriel, Introduction to *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, Shrine Auditorium, Los Angeles 24 February 1975. [↵](#)
2. Phil Collins, Genesis, O2 Arena London, 26 March 2022. [↵](#)
3. For encores, the band played tracks such as 'Watcher of the Skies,' 'The Knife,' and 'The Musical Box' – songs that had been staples of their live shows for a number of years. [↵](#)
4. Jenkins 2006, p. 3. [↵](#)

5. Jenkins 2006, p. 3. [!\[\]\(cd5c1940e86f1f387c3dfd1401e84daf_img.jpg\)](#)
6. Ryan & Thon 2014, p. 1. [!\[\]\(7b1962777b77814b3504eec0eacdcbb0_img.jpg\)](#)
7. At the time of writing – the mid-2020s – this proliferation shows no signs of stopping. [!\[\]\(40c0cb859538b7c513baf49f79d4a8a7_img.jpg\)](#)
8. Duffett 2013, p. 449. [!\[\]\(c5c41229cd4edac9c2016799f59ea534_img.jpg\)](#)
9. Thon 2023, p. 228. [!\[\]\(bcd5c0b820a0314226cd7277a9e4959e_img.jpg\)](#)
10. Although, given the technical constraints of the time, these were unreliable, the band remembered that the sequence of slides only worked on a handful of nights. <https://genesis-band.com/album/the-lamb-lies-down-on-broadway-tour-a-theatrical-odyssey-1974-1975/> [!\[\]\(1c8e98f248af4b2a88000293635f341f_img.jpg\)](#)
11. Holt 2011, pp. 50–1. [!\[\]\(b829e29f84c0489b8c85b8e9fa33d9f5_img.jpg\)](#)
12. Sedeño-Valdellós and Morilla 2024. [!\[\]\(435ea7976c3520a8625bda79bb6043c9_img.jpg\)](#)
13. Glenday 2021. [!\[\]\(65747ab360b22dafe0ed8df870a22546_img.jpg\)](#)
14. Ronson 2021. [!\[\]\(d9fa53959d883fe1c78f263b5599224c_img.jpg\)](#)
15. David Byrne, *American Utopia*. [!\[\]\(427bfc74f94a4ffdec570a8dac196d35_img.jpg\)](#)
16. For a full breakdown of the technological requirements for the show, see [Garfinkel 2018](#). [!\[\]\(62c1524ad7ad4cc429358251059204e0_img.jpg\)](#)
17. Garfinkel 2018. [!\[\]\(2ece09b8d31c5ea8dccfec1960a854f2_img.jpg\)](#)
18. Working with Tharp also gave Byrne the idea of choreographing sections of *Stop Making Sense* – and hence provided another transmedial thread to the narrative. [!\[\]\(ac4b771e50fe835b32905ace618dd7ad_img.jpg\)](#)
19. Maltin 2008, p. 1321. [!\[\]\(5715b463a15b03b3cf382cb0f3e831a5_img.jpg\)](#)
20. See, for example, [Hunter-Tilney 2018](#). [!\[\]\(b92cea22bd1a2bc113d53eb663ef0125_img.jpg\)](#)
21. King 2018. [!\[\]\(2c35be9bd7ef810e1db86f97d03aaaac_img.jpg\)](#)
22. Symes 2020. [!\[\]\(c4196248d2005b56ea70948cf49f0808_img.jpg\)](#)
23. Kohrer 2022. [!\[\]\(b12dc79975b969d99c31cfec67c864ca_img.jpg\)](#)
24. Jordan 2021. [!\[\]\(79438a527a005bb2fa61ab627af32189_img.jpg\)](#)

25. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/03/lil-nas-x-montero-call-me-by-your-name-video-satan-lap-dance-shoes-human-blood-apology.html> ↵
26. Ng & Gamble 2024, p. 3. ↵
27. See the discussion of K-Pop above. ↵
28. Chow 2021. ↵
29. Chow 2019. ↵
30. Moore 2020. ↵
31. Espinoza 2019. ↵
32. Biscaldi and Matera 2024, p. 11. ↵
33. Marin 2025, p. 8. ↵
34. Bates, Hobman and Bell 2020, pp. 54–5. ↵
35. Bates, Hobman and Bell 2020, p. 55. ↵
36. Although in Nas’ case there does not seem to have been an immediate threat, the artist was nervous about revealing his sexuality, precisely because it fixed and made visible an identity that he had honed online. ↵
37. *Long Live Montero* documentary. ↵
38. Quoted in [Jennings 2023](#). ↵
39. Westrup 2023, pp. 577–8. ↵
40. Dreckmann, in [Papenburg and Dreckmann 2024](#), p. 38. ↵
41. ‘Sun Goes Down,’ *MONTERO*. ↵
42. At the time of writing, the last such staging was by The Watch, in Autumn 2024 (in a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the album’s release). ↵
43. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sr5xcISnkDU&list=RDFftN_WVZkXw&index=2 ↵
44. Holland 2021. ↵

POSTSCRIPT

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Nick Cave: Manchester Evening News Arena, 25th September 2017

A little over a year after the Muse gig, I'm back at the MEN to see Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. I'm there on my own, and I'm there in different circumstances. On the 22nd May, at the end of an Arianna Grande concert, 22 people were killed by a terrorist bomb; the attack caught Grande's fans, many of them very young, and the parents who were waiting for their children in the foyer of the venue. In common with, I suspect, many people who live close enough to the MEN to think of it as one of our local venues, my first thought when I heard the news was to wonder if I knew any of the victims. I'd taught a large number of musicians, many of whom were playing and living around Manchester. I'd got used to seeing social media posts about the MEN gigs they'd been to; I'd seen the pictures and videos they'd posted. I knew that some of my ex-students were Ariana Grande fans. They could have been there, in a place I knew well, and they knew too. The attack was horrifying, and horrifyingly personal; this was our place. Months later, the venue still bears the scars of the attack. Sections are boarded up, the MacDonalds franchise is closed, and rather than milling around in the foyer before the doors open we queue on the pavement outside, each one of us submitting to a thorough body and bag search before we're allowed in. We're subdued – the queue is the quietest I've ever experienced. Once inside, I find my seat and I watch the arena filling. The

noise builds, as more and more people file in, but there's none of the rising hum of excitement I'm used to when fans gather in these numbers. The standing crowd stretches back from the stage (I later find out that some of them are ex-students; the next day, my social media feeds carry their messages and their pictures).

The gig was always likely to be different. The album that Cave is touring – *Skeleton Tree* (2016) – was being recorded when his 15-year-old son Arthur died. In the wake of the tragedy, Cave went back to the material, in what he later described as a 'fugue state.'¹ The resulting album sounds different: less polished, more dissonant, with melody lines that seem unfinished and lyrics that seem to circle around an unnamed source of pain. As fans, we know the material; as a father, with a son who is approaching Arthur Cave's age, I'm nervous – not an emotion I associate with the beginning of a show. I can't begin to imagine (in fact, I don't want to imagine) what it feels like to lose a child, as Cave did, as did the families of the victims of the bombing in May.

There's no support act; unlike Muse the year before, the stage is end-on to the arena floor, with raised platforms on which the drums, percussion, and keyboards are set up. The only feature out of the ordinary is a walkway, right in front of the audience, that can only be reached by jumping across from the lip of the main stage. As a fan, I know why this walkway is where it is. It's a crucial part of the understated design of the stage, put in place because Cave has always wanted to get as close to the audience as he can. Famously, during the band's set at Glastonbury in 2013, he climbed down from the pyramid stage, across the press pit, and perched himself unsteadily on the safety barriers, trusting on the security guards and the tightly packed audience to keep him upright. The lights dim to a blue wash covering the stage, and the band enters. As the applause dies down, they strike up the

opening chords of ‘Anthrocene,’ one of *Skeleton Tree*’s more fragmented, allusive tracks. When Cave walks on, it takes a moment for the cheers to subside. The first line of the song is delivered in silence, but before Cave can sing, someone shouts ‘We love you Nick’ – and by chance he just manages to catch one of those odd moments of complete silence that are part of even the most crowded gig. Cave pauses. ‘Well, I’m glad we got that sorted out,’ he says, and we laugh, and the song begins.

In 2018, Cave opened the *Red Hand Files* – a website on which fans post questions. In response to an enquiry, posted in February 2019, Cave explicitly discussed the Manchester Arena gig. The questioner (who was from Manchester) asked Cave if he ever cried when he sang his own songs. Cave’s answer was interesting. When he was singing, he said, he’d try to respond to the lyrics as an actor responded to a play text; concentrating on the words and delivering them (in classically Stanislavskian fashion) as if he were saying them for the first time. So he didn’t cry over the songs, but sometimes, like the audience, he responded to the event itself, and in Manchester in 2017, he, like us, knew what had happened on the 22nd May. He told his questioner that he couldn’t help remembering the victims:

At that concert in Manchester Arena, with these thoughts going through my mind, I felt an intense common bond with the audience, that became in the end almost overwhelming and which I will never forget. The unrestrained release at the end of the show was a deliverance for us all.²

That moment of sustained release in the most unlikely form, with an elongated rendition of ‘Stagger Lee,’ a violently profane version of the traditional folk song (in Cave’s version, Lee murders, violates, and mutilates his way through all the other characters, up to and including the

Devil himself). In performance, he's backed by people from the audience, brought up by the security crew; they fill the front of the stage, bellowing out the verses and the repeated 'Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs' that punctuate the song. Chief amongst them, and singled out by Cave to sing on mic, is a young boy in a Bad Seeds t-shirt. The moment might seem like a spontaneous exorcism, and, as someone who was there, I can say that's what it feels like to me. But in venue after venue, during the long tour, similar crowds gather on stage at the same point in the gig; in venue after venue, Cave selects one member of the impromptu choir to stand next to him and to partially sing the song. In other words, this powerful moment is a piece of theatre, something facilitated by the lighting and the stage design as much as it is by the close relation between Cave and his audience. The stage is bathed in blood-red light, with pools of red on the audience; on accents and emphasises, the red is supplemented or replaced by brilliant white. The song begins, each night, as Cave walks back to the stage (the previous track – 'The Weeping Song' – is the occasion for a journey into the audience); each night, Cave makes extensive use of the walkway in front of the crowd, delivering key lines bent over the audience, his finger raised in emphasis or admonition. The moment of exorcism – the point at which the accumulated tension of the event, and the histories leading up to it, are invoked and released – is a moment that is replicated on every single night of the tour, and made possible by the carefully designed extended scenographical organisation of the event.

On the face of it, Cave's performance seems relatively unadorned, but even here, one can see the elements I've identified as constituting the theatricality of contemporary popular music performance. To recap: I've argued that popular music performances that can be thought of as theatrical tend to conform to a number of scenographic, performative, and generic

techniques. As I've argued, all of these elements fall into place during a particularly complex moment in popular music history, from the mid-1960s to the mid/late 1970s. The template established by the end of that period is one to which live music events still tend to conform. They will make use of an extended scenography; that is, the staging will be designed to include, in some form, the auditorium and will be designed to promote an affective response to the performance. The elements on stage will be linked to each other, but will exist in different performative modes; each performance will be subject to a number of overlapping frames – templates based on the audience's and the performer's expectations of the event – but these frames will be determined by a number of factors (the network of complex generic systems, the persona adopted by the performer, the way that technology provides both a flexible mise-en-scene and place orientation, the story the performance might tell, and the means through which it tells that story).

Cave and the Bad Seeds, and the mise-en-scene that frames them that night in Manchester, utilise each one of these elements. The performance is generically slippery. At times, during 'Red Right Hand,' 'Tupelo,' or 'From Her to Eternity,' Cave is the proto-goth of his earliest years, calling down damnation like an Old Testament preacher (a description often applied to him in the early years of the band); at others – 'Into My Arms,' 'Distant Sky' – he is the forlorn singer-songwriter, alone at the piano, communing with the music rather than with the audience. The band's costuming (and Cave's) is simultaneously muted and declarative. In one reading, the musicians, who are dressed in variations of the formal dark male suit, appear as nothing more than musical craftspeople (like the guitarist on the *Beautiful Trauma* tour); their unemphatic clothing means that, for much of the gig, they fade into the background somewhat. However, they are dressed as Cave is dressed, and it is still the case that suits are unfamiliar

stage wear; therefore, on another reading, the band are Old Testament preachers too, or, given that some of the suits are conspicuously worn, frayed, and scruffy, all members of the same outsider gang. The performance, in common with every performance on this particular tour, follows an implicit narrative – the exorcism of a particularly private grief. In Manchester, that implicit narrative intersects with another – the narrative of the city’s grief, and its recovery. Finally, the mise-en-scene seems simple, a variation on the stage set-up Es Devlin considers boring; musicians framing the singer, drums and keyboards at the back. However, the musicians are very precisely framed, against a triptych of curtains, the largest behind the band, the other two angled on either side. These curtains are illuminated in washes of blue and red, and the largest one acts as a projection screen, carrying footage that fits the music. During ‘Distant Sky,’ for example, the black-and-white image of a woman walking on the beach, her back to us, dwarfs both Cave and the band.

Arguably, though, the most important part of the mise-en-scene is the walkway. As I’ve noted above, one of the defining features of Cave’s performances is a close relationship with the audience. Characteristically, he will move to the lip of the stage, or climb (as he did at Glastonbury) over any impediment to make sure that the front rows of the audience are within touching distance. At Manchester, Cave returned to the walkway throughout the show. It was not simply that he used it as a way of delivering the songs directly to the auditorium; it has no physical connection with the stage, and Cave has to leap over the intervening gap every time he wants to get closer to us. This small moment of risk, and the sense that Cave is stepping away from the band and into a space between the stage and the auditorium, carries its own affective charge, clearly manifested in the audience’s behaviour. Every time he moves on to the walkway, the crowd surges

forward (dangerously at one point; ‘Higgs Boson Blues’ comes to a premature halt, so that someone can be rescued from the crush). On the walkway, Cave can deliver songs directly to specific audience members; he can engage in cross-talk (one audience member comments on his socks; Cave teases them and shows the socks off) and encourage the audience to place their hands on his chest to feel his beating heart. The walkway, allied to the lighting, which spills over the audience, the colour-coded washes, the performative dynamism of the band, and the sense that everyone here, at this moment, is taking part in a narrative, in which grief is purged, gives the performance a powerful affective charge – the kind of affective charge that all popular music performances, in their various ways, aim to achieve. The arrangement of the set, and the positioning of the walkway, is therefore at the same time a necessary, expected component of the performance, a crucial part of the unfolding narrative the gig creates, and a framing device, which will itself be framed and reframed in all the circulated footage of the night.

As the above discussion indicates, even a performance that seems on the face of it to be a spontaneous reaction to grief – both Cave’s and the audience’s – exists, like any such performance, in the middle of a number of incommensurate frames and is profoundly mediated and theatricalised by the interaction of those frames. In this, it is the same as every other example used in this book. In each, performances are moments of embodied interaction, between audiences and artists who have motivated reasons for attendance; in each, this interaction takes place in a venue that demonstrates an expanded scenography, which aims to incorporate artists and audiences with an overall environment designed to stress the connections between them. The Cave gig also took place in the midst of a number of evolving narratives; the circulating news stories about the bombing and the events in

Cave's life; the ongoing narratives that surround Cave as an artist; the ways in which those narratives are mediated (and the ways in which the narratives surrounding the venue are also mediated). Even the tour itself was a (potentially) known quantity, at least to an extent; Cave played Bournemouth before he played Manchester, and footage from that gig had already been posted online. More than this, the gig was framed by Cave's own, extensive performance history, by the wider career that frames that history, and by the complex relation between Cave and the genres his work had occupied over the course of what was, in 2017, already a long recording life; and by the way in which that history and those generic interactions have themselves been framed, in performance, in recordings, and the ancillary images that accompanied the recordings, and in all the mediated images of Cave, created over the course of his career, from The Birthday Party through to the time of the Manchester show, in photographs, interviews, videos, press appearances, articles, video essays, and through all the social media channels that serve to curate, complicate, and disseminate the complexities of Cave's work, persona, and life. The lighting states, the organisation of the stage (and the way that the staging is itself framed by all those in the crowd recording snippets or sections of the show), are framing devices that are themselves subject to reframing as they are circulated, endlessly, through all the platforms and sites that carry information, recordings, images, and reflections of a night that feels, in the moment, unmediated, immediate, and unique.

Finally, the life of the performance extends through time, both as a series of recordings and pieces of documentation, readily available online, and in the memories of those who, like myself, were there on the night. I receive an unexpected reminder of this simple fact two years after seeing Cave at the MEN. Just before the pandemic hits, I'm in Waterstones in the centre of

Birmingham. I'm writing something about Cave, and it strikes me I don't have a copy of his first novel, *And the Ass Saw the Angel*. Luckily, Waterstones has one on the shelf; I take it to the checkout desk for the shop assistant to scan. He turns the book over, looks at me, and smiles. Are you a Cave fan? he asks; and I say yes. He says something about waiting for Cave to tour again. When did you see him last? I ask, and he says in 2017: I was at the Manchester gig. I tell him I was there too. At this point, in other circumstances (and without using the terms I've used in this study), we might reflect on the complex, endlessly mediated framings and reframings that govern the production, performance, and reception of live music, and the impact the scenographically expanded, theatricalised environment had on our perception of the artist and the event. We might have talked about the way that such events retell themselves, in the memories of the participants, and in the post-history of the show. Instead, there's a very small pause. And we do what fans tend to do in such circumstances; we compress all of the complexities of the performance, and all its multifaceted framings and reframings, into the simplest and most direct of words. That was quite some night, wasn't it? he says; and I say yes, it was.

Notes

1. <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/who-is-the-girl-in-amber/> ↵
2. <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/have-your-own-songs-ever-made-you-cry-whilst-performing-them-on-stage/> ↵

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