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Authenticity, Empathy, and the Creative Imagination

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the changing beliefs about artistic integrity and aesthetic value that feed into judgments of rock authenticity, taking issue with scholarship that reduces authenticity to acts of misguided judgment, myths, conceits, and fakery. It argues that there is no consensus about the meaning of authenticity in rock music, as understandings change according to the varied experiences, perceptions, circumstances, and vocabularies of participants. Authenticity in rock should not be approached cynically as if based on deception, gullibility, and ideological illusions, but for the insights it can provide into the circumstances that afford imaginative acts of creative connection and experiential empathy.

KEYWORDS

Authenticity; aesthetic of rock; musicians; empathy; audience; popular music

Authenticity is a word that has weaved throughout the descriptions, analysis, and judgments of scholars and critics of popular music. For a long time it has been treated skeptically, as a dubious notion. After [Richard Middleton](#) wrote of the “debris of ‘authenticity’” (note the inverted commas) in his agenda setting *Studying Popular Music* (139), [Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh](#) declared that the subject had been “consigned to the intellectual dust-heap” (30). Meanwhile, [Richard Peterson](#) argued that authenticity is “fabricated” and many have written of authenticity as “fake” ([Atton](#); [Harker](#); [Barker and Taylor](#)). Authenticity has been dismissed, deconstructed, left for dead, or simply discarded.

While academics were having their say, Bruce Springsteen was one of the major rock artists to reflect upon the debris of authenticity in public. When talking at a music industry convention in 2012 he said, “We live in a post-authentic world. Today, authenticity is a house of mirrors. It’s all just what you’re bringing when the lights go down” ([Springsteen](#)). Quite what is brought “when the lights go down” was rather enigmatic. During his later theater shows in New York City he more bluntly told his audiences, “I come from a boardwalk town where almost everything is tinged with fraud. And, so am I. In case you haven’t figured that out yet” ([Barton](#)). Yet, Springsteen’s exposure of his fraudulent qualities did not undermine his integrity as an artist. This truth, conveyed in conversational tones to his audience, provided further evidence of . . . of what? The truth of his fraud? Of his authenticity? In certain respect, it did. It is one of the “ironies of authenticity . . . that the exposure of the image further authenticates the artist” ([Negus](#)

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71). Or does it? Springsteen was also saying that authenticity doesn't matter in the way it once did. To him, and to his audience. He was acknowledging that his fans know that musicians must negotiate the demands of commercial industries and processes of commodification, as do the followers of many rock bands (Baym). Springsteen's self-conscious use of the *post* prefix signaled that "we" are aware of the debate about what it means to be authentic; we are not engaging with it in a naïve manner.

Similar reservations were voiced by other rock musicians. David Byrne recalled having doubts during a Talking Heads tour of Japan back in 1981. He remembered being inspired by Noh theater and stylized religious rituals: "I was constantly asking myself: 'How spontaneous, authentic, improvisational does one need to be on stage?' 'How real do you need to be?' . . . I started thinking that this idea of us just being ourselves on stage is useless" (Hunter-Tilney). Byrne began thinking that "costumes and choreography" and "artificiality and exaggeration" can be "just as real on stage."

P J Harvey was also questioning truth and realism, challenging a journalist who assumed her songs were "written specifically from your point of view" by replying: "I'm not interested in telling people my autobiography." She explained how she uses "techniques a writer would adopt, which is to assume different narratives – third person, first person, dramatic monologue, casting myself as a man or as a woman – as a way of exploring ideas and characters" (Medd 22). Yet, the same year (2011), Harvey reflected upon the need to "inhabit the song during performance," and the way lyrics written when she was younger no longer felt "honest for me to sing." She said: "I can only play the songs that I can sing with any authenticity, my being a 42-year-old woman" (Cooper).

The comments of Springsteen, Harvey, and Byrne remind us that the "reality" they present is staged, and that the authenticity of a song is realized in the act of performing. But it is no less real than, nor is it removed from, the reality of the roles we perform and identities we are ascribed or adopt in our everyday lives. This too involves costumes, choreography, and exaggeration – whether in a workplace, in a bar, or lounging at home. The idea of life as drama goes back at least to Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage" monologue (*As You Like It*) and has been given scholarly pertinence by Erving Goffman's concept of the "presentation of self in everyday life," and Judith Butler's influential argument about the performance of gender.

The metaphor used by Springsteen reminds us of the Kraftwerk song "Hall of Mirrors." Kraftwerk used the idea to evoke the way that you can "make up the person you want to be" and change "into a new personality." They were, of course, deadpanning the familiar and clichéd postmodern idea that the rock musician "invents" and "reinvents" themselves. David Bowie did it to great critical acclaim and popular adulation. He carried it off convincingly – most of the time. In contrast, Mumford & Sons looked and sounded implausible and uncomfortable, received much ridicule, yet still had hit records. It was not just other musicians and rock fans that hated their identity. So, apparently, did the band:

All that success and yet, here they are, on the verge of releasing their third album, scoffing at virtually everything that made them famous – their old neckerchief-and-tweed-waistcoat image ("we looked like absolute idiots"), their name ("a ball ache"), even their sound ("fuck the banjo, I fucking hate the banjo") – and talking about the "inevitability" of losing fans

with their radical new direction: “Our new sound will freak people out.” Having irritated a lot of people en route to becoming one of the biggest bands in the world, it would seem Mumford & Sons have finally succeeded in irritating themselves. (Petridis)

Perhaps this was an example of post-authenticity in motion. The very act of masquerading as authentic. Donning the debris of authenticity without any sense of irony. Or shame. That came later, it seems. Were Mumford & Sons a sure sign that authenticity was indeed on the scrapheap of history? Maybe not. Their embarrassment was a sign of its importance. In the same year that Mumford & Sons were having their image crisis, *Pitchfork* offered a roundup of “Quotes of the Year, 2015.” The first one was by Beach House’s Alex Scally. He said: “I feel fatigued by the concept that no art is safe from commercialism. Can’t I just experience something? I don’t want it to be branded. The thing that I crave is authenticity.” We could, of course, dismiss this as a conceit, as one more example of a musician using a phrase that has been overused. But like other repeated words that we do not drop from our understanding of life – friendship, love, trust – Scally spoke of a disconnection he perceived between a concept and the desire for an experience. There is a lot more going on here than a rock musician mouthing a cliché. There is a hint of how “authenticity” stands in for and straddles the mediations of language, concepts, perceptions, understandings, and experiences. Just a few days after Scally’s comments were published, the life of David Bowie was being mourned and celebrated. Not only for his imaginative inventions, but also for the way such inventions allowed him to express deep aspects of his sensibility, experiences, identity, and emotions, and for the way this resonated with fans. Mumford & Sons’ publicly expressed anxiety was a sign that there was much more going on than inventing a personality when you enter the hall of mirrors.

In this article we will join the ongoing discussion about authenticity in rock music by entering this hall of mirrors. This will inevitably be partial and polemical. Our aim is not to comprehensively acknowledge everything that has been written about rock and authenticity but to draw out some arguments that might provoke further discussion and debate: To encourage more critical and reflective approaches to how we introduce the word authenticity into our research and writing. “We” here means only those of us using this word in the English language writing about rock music. This is tricky enough without even touching on how it may or may not translate into other languages, and to genres other than rock. In this article we position ourselves against those critics and academics who seek to expose it as a conceit or a false belief – as if this will somehow lead to the eviction of authenticity from the lexicon of rock music studies.

We recognize that critics, scholars, and fans – as well as many musicians – also crave authenticity. However, our cravings might be exercised more carefully. We should understand the specific ways that authenticity is deployed by rock music scholars in constructing their positions and arguments, and in offering interpretations of music and musicians. A point we want to make in this article is straightforward: There is a strong tendency for academics to use authenticity casually and lazily, as Adam Behr also notes, much more so than the musicians and fans that they study. We should not collapse or conflate other possibly related words into authenticity. We should not assume that when musicians use certain terms that these are simply synonyms for authenticity. In the hall of

mirrors the image on each mirror is not identical, and many are distorted. We should be attuned to how scholars, critics, musicians, and fans are using the debris and the distortions of authenticity.

In the next three sections we offer a selective and schematic summary and a partly speculative route forward. We wish to open up a discussion that many critics and academics seek to close down. First, we offer a recap of the beliefs about artistic integrity and aesthetic validity that fed into understandings of what it means to be authentic in rock. Second, we offer a critique of scholarly attempts to reduce authenticity to apparently simple acts of misguided judgment, myths, conceits, fakery, and outright illusions. Third, we offer some pointers to how understandings of authenticity change, and are changing according to the varied experiences, perceptions, circumstances, and vocabularies of participants, particularly as these have been articulated around ideas of access and sharing across social media. Our theme, in short, is that authenticity does not signal a gullible act of ideological illusion. Rather, it signals an imaginative act of experiential union.

A Genealogical Sketch: The Legacies of Folk, Romanticism, and Modernism

We might begin by treating authenticity as a type of “keyword” in a manner suggested by [Raymond Williams](#) in his brief summaries of how words (such as industry, commerce, or consumption) change meaning over time, and carry traces of earlier semantic references and associations into their contemporary use. However, Williams did not include authenticity in his keywords of society and culture. So perhaps the term is more relevant to popular music scholars than in the more general study of culture. [Roy Shuker’s](#) compendium of “key concepts” in popular music studies offers no etymology, no historical context, and only vague musings that authenticity can refer to “originality” and “creativity,” and has “connotations of seriousness, sincerity, and uniqueness” (17). Shuker sketchily notes that authenticity can be articulated against commerce (as in the quote from Alex Scally above), is often deemed to reside in subcultures, and has been located differently in live rock performance, and recorded dance club cultures. Considering that this is offered as a guide to a “key concept” in the study of popular music, it barely touches on the resonances of the term in rock, let alone in popular music studies more generally.

In a critique of Williams’s approach, one even more applicable to Shuker’s, [Quentin Skinner](#) distinguishes between the varied ways that people may use the same words, and the concepts that they may possess. Following this we might think about how people may use the English word authenticity without being aware of the range of meanings of the term, or without knowledge of how this may differ from the way others use the word. The everyday use of a word does not imply a consensus nor an agreement about its meaning for those speaking or writing it. This is a point that will resonate throughout the next few pages and to which we will return in our third section. Equally, people may understand aspects of their life through a concept of “authenticity” that is independent from or prior to the word. We cannot assume that we know or can simply deduce how this deeper conceptual understanding may be articulated in words. From his numerous historical studies of political terms and concepts, Skinner makes the point that humans have often understood the world through concepts *prior* to a specific word being introduced and

used to condense and to convey the meaning of that concept. This clearly makes the term even more slippery and ambiguous. Again, this is a theme that will weave throughout the rest of this article as we turn to how rock critics and academics have responded by seeking to collapse or reduce ideas and concepts into unambiguous types and myths of authenticity.

A sense of how the collapsing has occurred can be gained by briefly summarizing and reflecting upon how authenticity became central to the value accorded to rock music. This is, in some ways, a familiar story. But it is worth briefly recapping as a prelude to the responses to these legacies. In various writings, Simon Frith showed how the 1960s countercultural generation adopted the idea that rock was “was unmistakably a folk-music form” (Landau 130) and represented an authentic “truth to experience” (*The Magic That* 164). Jon Landau is just one writer who provided an illustration of how rock critics conflated both the original folk-derived version of authenticity with the idea of self-expression that would become crucial to how rock musicians should be authentic. Musicians could not only articulate the beliefs and values of a rock community (*Sociology of Rock*), but could also express more personal sensibilities and experiences with them at the center (Eliot). This was an aesthetic central to the appreciation of Dylan – but not representative of Dylan’s publicly stated views of himself as an artist.

The version of authenticity here, derived from the Romantic sensibility forged in the early part of the nineteenth century, continues to inform many assumptions about what it is to be “an artist.” M.H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* cogently identifies this Romantic view of the world as “two common and antithetic metaphors of the mind, one comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects, the other to a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the object it perceived. The first of these was characteristic of much of the thinking from Plato to the eighteenth century; the second typifies the prevailing romantic conception of the poetic mind” (viii). The idea of the artist being at the center of their universe, a beacon illuminating the world around them with their insights and feelings, and a mirror reflecting the times and their audiences, would resonate strongly with many a rock star, aspiring or established.

The Romantic view of rock authenticity was easily accommodated to a perceived set of oppositions that counterposed mainstream compliance against independent innovation; pop manufacture against rock spontaneity; and commercial constraint against creative autonomy (Shuker; Harron). Again, this developed out of rock’s central position in the counterculture of the 1960s when, for a faction of a generation, music ceased to be seen as only entertainment and became valued as personal, artistic expression, and assumed to emerge outside of industry and commerce. While these oppositions continued to inform the values of many fans and musicians, they were joined by what Middleton called “avant-garde ‘authenticity’” (43), summarized by Keir Keightley as a “Modernist credos of experimentation, innovation, development, change” (136).

The Modernist approach to rock authenticity can be detected in the early 1970s, most notably perhaps with the group Devo. Responding to conflicts of the previous decade, the band’s two key members, Gerald V. Casale and Mark Mothersbaugh, had witnessed the fatal shooting of four students engaging in peaceful protest at Kent State University on 4 May 1970, with two of the victims being friends of Casale. He remembered

For me, it was the turning point. . . . Suddenly I saw it all clearly; all these kids with their idealism, it was very naïve. After Kent, it seemed like you could either join a guerrilla group like the Weather Underground, actually try assassinating some of these evil people . . . or you could just make some kind of whacked-out creative Dada response. Which is what Devo did. (qtd. in Reynolds 38):

Here, we can see Devo abandoning any *Rolling Stone*-endorsed countercultural idea of an authentic expressive artist and moving toward a type of Modernist truth-to-experience that offered an absurdist response, echoing the Dadaist and Surrealist reactions to the horrors of World War One.

In identifying the emergence of this Modernist ethos as a type of rock authenticity, Keightley observed that “while a number of rock critics view artifice as the negation of authenticity, juxtaposing David Bowie’s playful obliqueness to Bruce Springsteen’s sincere directness, what is at issue is the difference between the two families of authenticity” (138). And, as we noted above, Springsteen’s authenticity was voiced by characters and tinged by fraud, and Bowie’s obliqueness allowed expression of deeply personal feelings. Bowie briefly extended his use of artifice to experimenting with Camp (we follow Sontag in capitalizing) in the early 1970s. But it was perhaps the way Farrokh Bulsara, a post-colonial child of Parsi-Indian parents, reimaged himself as Freddie Mercury and formed Queen, that demonstrated how the ironic pleasures of artifice and exaggeration offered by Camp were at the heart of rock music. As Susan Sontag observed, “One is drawn to Camp when one realises that sincerity is not enough” (288). There was considerable “critical opposition” to Queen in the early to mid-1970s from writers whose values were informed by folk and Romantic beliefs about authenticity, as detailed in Anne Desler’s study. Queen’s critical re-appraisal, and eventual canonization, signaled greater acceptance among rock critics of the value and prevalence of Camp theatricality, and recognition of the latent homophobia and restrictive gender codes that informed earlier rock criticism (Desler).

The Velvet Underground knowingly mixed Camp, Romanticism, and Modernism, particularly after meeting Andy Warhol. In Bernardo Alexander Attias’s terms, the band offered a “moral sensibility” (137) that made the distinction between “authenticity and artifice” misleading, incorporating elements of avant-garde modernism with postmodernist commercial pop culture, and challenging the conservatism of folk traditionalism and apparently unmediated expressiveness of Romanticism.

Through this very brief sketch, we can begin to get a general sense of the genealogies of creative truth and artistic value that became integral to the way rock musicians were and continue to be judged. We can begin to see how discussions of value and truth were introduced and understood in specific contexts by musicians, critics, and fans, and how this drew from a much longer history of art, poetry, and folk song. We can also see potential conflicts along the fault lines of folk, Romanticism, and Modernism. For the counterculture, rock was appreciated as a communal and as an expressive art, and this was elevated and privileged above the way that it also drew from traditions of performance, drama, and theatrical spectacle that obviously depended upon artifice and exaggeration.

Modernism drew equally upon artifice and exaggeration and yet sought to present something more than just entertainment. This was articulated in an ideological distinction between rock and pop that endured up to the late-1970s and into the 1980s, later

challenged by accounts of the varied authenticities of pop music (Coulter). Within the genre of rock music, the most prominent critical emphasis was on the expressive individual and the way they could articulate a collective identity. It was, perhaps, this partial and selective incorporation of the expressive and the communal that opened it up so readily to academic critique.

Fakes, Frauds, and Ideological Illusions: The Knowing Critique of Naivete

One of the most referenced academic articles on authenticity within English language studies of rock music was written by Allan Moore and published back in 2002. Moore made an argument that was in vogue at the time, and that became something of an orthodoxy. He proposed that authenticity “does not inhere in any combination of musical sounds” but “is a matter of interpretation,” a “construction made on the act of listening” (210). Moore argued for “a shift from consideration of the intention of various originators towards the activities of various perceivers” (220). He drew implicitly (without reference) on theories of social construction, social-psychological attribution, and performance.

Moore argued that understanding authenticity entails focusing on the act and process of “authentication.” This occurs when a composer or performer “succeeds in conveying the impression of integrity” (214), of “unmediated communication” (214), of “accurately representing the ideas of another” (218), and when “the listener’s experience of life is being validated” (220). Moore offered a typology of three overlapping types of “authentication” – first person (valuing the authentic expressive artist), second person (valuing an authentic representation of a listener’s experience), third person (valuing an authentic rendition of a tradition or existing song). The term “succeeds in conveying the impression” (214, 218, 220) is used repeatedly in the article to support a social-psychological argument about the attribution of authenticity. It is a perception of listeners: A recording is “perceived to be authentic because it is unmediated” (213), or “it is the success with which a particular performance conveys its impression that counts” (220), and “whether such perceivers are necessarily fooled . . . is beside the point” (220).

In making these claims, Moore did not cite the voices of ordinary listeners – the fans assumed to be making attributions of authenticity. Although apparently dismissive of the expressive artist and basing his argument on the interpreting listener, he mainly included comments from musicians. He noted that Eric Clapton “identified with the sound of Robert Johnson’s voice,” as many musicians have done. Bob Dylan recalled a similar experience. Yet, identification is not the same as attributing authenticity. The word “identification” is not an example of a musician using the word “authenticity.” It is common for musicians and listeners to identify with a voice – sung, spoken – heard without visual codes on a recording or broadcast on radio, without making an assumption about the authenticity of the voice. In a similar way Moore quotes Cynthia Lennon saying that the Silver Beatles “look like, sound alike and think alike” the Beatles (217). Yet again, she is not quoted as calling them authentic. She referred to them as good imitators, convincingly acting out their role as the Beatles. Moore mentions other tribute bands, but he does not provide any evidence that listeners perceive them as authentic rather than good imitators, skilled at role play. Actors, basically. Moore confuses the idea of verisimilitude – a central aesthetic of fiction, art, film making, studio production – with

authenticity. Rather than people appreciating and relating to a representation, he assumes a response to something more real that is somehow behind or beyond the representation. But he offers no voice, description, nor illustration that would support such a claim, merely presuming that he can see through the illusions that are deceiving others, such as Clapton and Lennon.

Although Moore argued that authenticity does not reside in the music and intentions of originators, he provides many musical examples to suggest otherwise. This includes reference to Paul Weller's "gravelly vocals connoting a voice made raw from crying or shouting" (214); Neil Tennant's "flat, regular delivery ... the refusal of emotional involvement" (214); and Dick Gaughin's use of "rock instrumentation, mixolydian VII, self-expressive electric guitar breaks and palpable anger in his voice" (220). Moore offers no example of fans, musicians, or critics describing these musical features as authentic, but merely asserts that these sounds, as he interprets and describes them, are perceived by listeners as authentic. The only person seemingly making the attribution of authenticity, to be perceiving authenticity here, is the author of the article.

There is a further twist in the argument as Moore castigates the "very naivety of such a perception" (214), a claim that is made without reference to actual examples of anyone perceiving recorded performances in such a naïve way. The apparent naivete of listeners is only supported with vague reference to Johan Fornäs's "generalization of Grossberg's typology of authenticity" (214) – a rather tenuous link as both Fornäs and Grossberg discussed authenticity in a largely abstract way in relation to broader debates about capitalism and modernity. It is difficult to know quite where, and with whom, the naivete resides.

Ironically, Moore's arguments depended upon an implicit performance theory of authenticity. Yet, a performance is just that. It is staged. These naïve assumptions, or these assumptions about naïve audiences, or both, are actually contested by performance theory. They were challenged back in the 1990s, by Simon Frith who argued that when we engage with musicians and singers, we – people, fans, audiences – are not responding to something that is "behind" a performance but to what is in front of us, seen and heard. Writing of the notion of "sincerity" Frith argued that this "cannot be measured by searching for what lies *behind* the performance; if we are moved by a performer, we are moved by what we *immediately* hear and see" (*Performing Rites* 206). Frith's point was that any apparent tensions between a "real person" (a legally named person on any contract, for example), a "star personality" comprehensible through various media, and a "song personality" of sentiments and characterizations, can be harmonized through performance in such a way that "truth of feeling becomes an aesthetic truth, not a moral one" (215). The implication of Frith's argument is that the perceptions of audiences are not naïve misperceptions, because any truth is in a performance: The moment of identification with the sound of a voice, the sense of belonging is formed by music and not in something that is behind it. There is no illusion, no trick. It is what it is. And, as audiences and listeners we are not naïve, we are not fooled.

Moore's article was and still is a rare attempt to grapple with the issues in the study of rock music, and is valuable for getting us to think critically about the assumptions we make about music and musicians (for a similar typology see also [Weisethaunet and Lindberg](#)). Yet, it is symptomatic of an argument found across a range of writing that assumes authenticity to be a delusion on the part of perceivers and often outright fakery,

forgery, and deception on the part of performers (Barker and Taylor; Atton). The opt out clause is that academics, even as they make these arguments, excuse themselves from having to deal with questions of truth with such clauses as “what matters is not the personal truth of an experience, but how convincing the expression of the experience appears to an audience” (Atton 207).

Moore’s article drew from critiques of folk music, a genre that has provoked many critical appraisals of truth and authenticity (see Filene). He cited an article by Steve Redhead and John Street in which they took the idea of audiences’ perceptions of authenticity to constitute a political “ideology,” one that allowed musicians to legitimate their integrity and authority. Redhead and Street were concerned with a 1980s variant of “folk roots” and deployed the term authenticity to condense components of “folk ideology” that linked music to “the people,” identifying this in beliefs about not selling out, ideas of a music community, and assumptions that music “rests on some prior . . . interpretation of ‘reality’” (181). Redhead and Street were concerned that music was being packaged and sold in such a way as to offer an “ideological construct” and “an idea that is suspect” (182). Yet, here again, authenticity was a term used by the authors of the article when referring to the assumed beliefs of musicians and critics. Their article cited no musicians or critics actually accepting the suspect ideology by using the term “authenticity.”

Still in our hall of mirrors, with the reflections now bouncing back and forth between musicians, fans, scholars, and industries, we arrive at an idea that is here explicit, but so often implicit in academic writings about authenticity. This is the claim that authenticity is an “ideology” – a distorted belief (sometimes a “myth”) that carries untruths. In all of these academic critiques there is more than a hint of the enduring idea of “false consciousness” that can be traced back to Marx. Unlike traditional Marxism, these critiques do not delve too far into the underlying material conditions that might lead to these false beliefs, nor do they ponder exactly just what this ideological false consciousness might mask. Although they do imply that the villain is, with predictable inevitability, the commercial music industry. In certain respects, the skeptical approach to authenticity is indebted to Simon Frith’s agenda setting *Sound Effects* in which he referred to the “rock dreams” of “freedom, control, power, a sense of *life*” as “needs defined by capitalism . . . a commoditized dream.” But, they neglect the typically Frithian twist in his wry observation that such an argument “conceals as much as it reveals” (272).

One consequence of all of this apparent myth-breaking is that any further discussion of just what might be concealed, and any further questions about the possible value of the idea of authenticity begin to be closed down. The issue is suspect, and indeed to be placed on the intellectual dust heap. The implication is that a “truth” is concealed by false ideas and naïve beliefs. Yet we don’t need to worry about what this truth might be, as it is apparently beside the point. Academics adopting a certain perspective can see this, but it seems that musicians and their gullible fans cannot. Well, maybe or maybe not. We began this article by quoting musicians reflecting upon authenticity, acknowledging the debated character of the idea, voicing doubts about what might be “truly” authentic, and aware that it is staged. Yet, also suggesting that it may be no less important, and no less real.

If we consider how the term authenticity is used in the various arguments we have referred to, we might conclude that it is used far more by academics than it is by musicians and by fans. The varied terms that fans might use when referring to musicians

– identification, community, the people, roots, selling out – are collapsed or subsumed into an argument about authenticity which, in turn, becomes used to dump together a range of beliefs and expressions, and then to show these to be suspect, dubious, and false. This conflates these notions of selling out, roots, identification, community, and the people – all terms that, as far as we can see, in themselves, do not necessarily imply a notion of “authenticity.” It also assumes that authenticity can be logically argued away. But cynically seeing through the paradoxes, contradictions, and limitations of an idea is not necessarily the same as understanding why it might still be important.

Authenticity and the Empathetic Imagination: Acting, Access, and Sharing

There is no consensus nor agreement about the use of the word authenticity in rock music. The term has been infused with folk, Romantic, and Modernist values in criticism, and different concepts have been collapsed into or misleadingly assumed to be synonyms for authenticity by scholars. That understandings of authenticity change over time is clear from our brief survey, and a point accentuated in [Carys Wyn Jones’s](#) case study of Radiohead and in Adam Behr’s research on the collective practices of rock bands.

Behr shows how interactions among members depend upon a concept of authenticity that becomes articulated in responses to continuity and change, as new members may come and go and as the identity of a band endures even as “original” members depart or die. Although Behr offered his study as a modest addition to Moore’s typology of authentication, he teases out the intricate ways that sociability, creative practice, and human interaction become integral to a deceptively more profound sense of “we” group identity. From a study of a range of rock groups, Behr shows how each band member contributes to creating a joint “personality” that is composed of the practices, collective decisions, and actions that guide music making and performance, commercial activity, and public conduct. This simultaneously creates a type of “template” or a framework into which someone can be introduced if a band member leaves.

The implication of Behr’s study is that authenticity is realized as much in social interaction – in acting – as it might be conveyed in the beliefs or perceptions of fans or performed in a real or fake manner by musicians, or signified visually, and then authenticated in ways comparable to how an antique, leaded window, or Renaissance painting might be verified. Whilst Behr clearly draws on how musicians use a concept of authenticity to condense the dynamics and qualities of group belonging and their relationship to audiences, he does not assume that this is a false or naïve belief shared among band members or fans. It is not just an idea or impression, but a “socially extended material practice” (18). The links between band members, and ties between musicians and fans are not simply expressed as ideas but as “concrete acts” that involve the “entanglement of socialization and creativity” (18). This is an important point about how our conceptual understandings of life can be expressed in action, as much as they may be articulated in words.

Here we extend Behr’s insight on how authenticity is realized in social interaction and endures as social practice, and concrete acts. First, we return briefly to the acts and interactions that lurk within the assumed tensions between creativity and commerce. We

then look at how notions of empathy, access, and sharing – again grounded in social practices and creative interaction – are enduring experiences that articulate judgments about truth, integrity, and authenticity.

Although often treated rhetorically by critics as absolute values (and often in Manichean terms), the practices of musicians suggest a complex interplay between the commercial and creative. For some musicians there is no tension between the commercial and creative; greater commercial success accompanies increased critical acclaim, or the commercial provides both a framework (contractual deadline, for example) and an incentive to create. Such sentiments were expressed back in the 1960s by Manfred Mann and John Lennon, among others (Frith, *Sociology of Rock*; Negus). Attias argues that the Velvet Underground, and Lou Reed in particular, quite consciously concealed their commercial awareness, and their market oriented creative practice, behind a “mirage” of “deliberately constructed artifice whose claim to offer listeners an unadulterated reality was a ruse” (137). Yet, such examples of musicians who readily accommodate to, and even draw creative impulses from commercial structures, does not invalidate the comments of Alex Scally in our opening section. What it means to be commercial and creative, and the practices and human relationships entailed, are experienced within specific circumstances by different musicians. Taking these tensions as abstract enduring values will not get us very far in understanding the actual working practices and human interactions of sociality, creativity, and work that constitute the relationships between labels and musicians specifically, and dynamics of the broader music business more generally.

We extend this further with a quotation from Bill Ryder-Jones, a musician that has adopted the role of creative maverick, his music often simply ignoring stylistic distinctions and genre divisions. In contrast to many received ideas, he expressed surprise and satisfaction at the nature of his relationship with his label, Domino, and its owner, Laurence Bell:

He didn't see me as a commodity that was ever going to make his record label a lot of money. He saw me as someone who was maybe a bit interesting and a little bit different and had something to say, when I didn't even think that. And I do believe that now. So, Domino looks after me. (Rice)

Ryder-Jones echoes accounts of how Warner Music kept Randy Newman and Van Dyke Parks under contract even though they were losing money (Zollo), and anecdotes about the way Virgin Records did the same with XTC. Our point here is that commerce and creativity are not abstract tensions, but realized in the quality of understanding in human relationships between musicians and people at labels. Over the years, many labels, and managers, have worked with and represented musicians according to unwritten contracts and relations of trust. The working relationship between musicians and labels (or managers or agents or promoters) cannot be reduced to simple models of authentic artistic creativity and corrupting commercial imperatives.

Moving from the relationship between musicians and industry to musicians and fans, we can find more nuanced practices that challenge any assumption about fake representations and false perceptions. In an entry in the *Pitchfork* series *Over/ Under*, contemporary rock artist [Father John Misty](#) reflected on what authenticity means to him

I think to most people the idea of authenticity is pork pie hats and vests and banjos, but real authenticity is just empathy because everyone views their own experiences as being the gold standard for authenticity. If you can empathize with people and make them feel that what you're talking about is somehow reflective of their own experiences, then you've won their vanity and thus achieved authenticity.

It is perhaps not surprising that an artist such as Father John Misty, who portrays a knowing, self-aware persona, can reflect upon authenticity in this way. It is significant that he used the term empathy.

In recent years, empathy has become a buzzword across a range of writings about individual and social life, whether academic and popular. Empathy has been accorded an unwarranted “grandness” and made to carry much explanatory and prescriptive significance (Gibson). This has been particularly so in the study of music, where the commonplace that “empathy” allows individuals to perform together is extended to the notion that music is an inherent social good that can instill an emotional bond of understanding with others and overcome prejudice (Clarke, De Nora, and Vuoskoski) – a claim that ignores how music can equally divide us and reinforce social and geographical divisions. If, as Behr argues, authenticity is realized in creative practices and collective actions, so too is empathy. For example, when musicians upload work on YouTube, the comments section has become a vibrant space for audiences to express their connection to the music and work presented. Along with this, the artist too can respond and connect back.

The sensation of empathy became more apparent due to the restrictions imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic and canceling of shows, performances, clubs, and social gatherings. Social media platforms offered a space for a connection between musicians and fans. Bob Boilen who ran the *Tiny Desk Concert* series introduced a *Tiny Desk at Home* series, as a part of a more general trend for musicians to perform through social media from their homes. Boilen said, “For some, music and performance is pure entertainment. For many creators and fans, it is a deeply emotional part of their life, a window into different ways of thinking, an emotional connection, a source of inspiration” (qtd. in Frank). In quoting Boilen, Allegra Frank argues that “live music is now more intimate than ever, thanks to social media.”

Frank's observation echoes the studies of Nancy Baym, conducted many years before the Covid-19 pandemic, of how social media have accentuated the way that being a rock musician entails managing “the intimate work of connection” to fans. These connections have always existed through the use of other media such as video, radio, television, and mail, but the digital age has made this work more evident and complex. Baym quotes singer-songwriter Nacho Vegas, who says that music, can, “create in some people who like your songs the sense that you have important things in common, like feelings or experiences in life. Which is not always true. But it can be beautiful as well. Relationships with the audience can be beautiful and strange at the same time” (10).

The notion of empathy is also articulated in the actions and practices through which people – fans, listeners, musicians – engage with songs and music. John Gibson's critical approach to empathy in literary fiction provides a way of thinking further about musicians. Discussing fiction, Gibson writes, “I obviously cannot in fact think and feel *as* another. But the imagination makes possible forms of experience that the real world does not.” Extending this to a discussion of Medea, he continues, “. . . I come to feel as she does not because I project my self into her situation but because I succeed in

imagining what it is like to be her in her situation” (5). Here, in this example specifically and in fiction more generally, empathy is an imaginative “other directed perspective taking” (5).

Gibson’s arguments about empathy being important in the experience of fiction, is supported in the way that [Jedd Beaudoin](#) prefaces an interview with the Flaming Lips’ Wayne Coyne when discussing the album *American Head*, observing, “Like the best work the band have done, there is an honest quality to it, a sense that the music and lyrics arrive from experience and with a sense of empathy.” Wayne Coyne himself is then reported to reflect upon the empathetic imagination when referring to his experience of listening to the Beatles: “I think about hearing the Beatles singing ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ when I was seven or eight years old. People say a lot about the Beatles’ music. You find that ‘Strawberry Fields’ is a place that John Lennon remembered from when he was a child. But at seven or eight, I didn’t care. I didn’t think, ‘Is this real or not?’ Whatever it meant, it was something that exploded in my mind. It didn’t have to be real.” In certain respects, this is an observation that echoes David Byrne’s ruminations on whether a stage performance has to be “real.” Equally, it provides an insight into how a sense of empathy is experienced in the practice of listening – it is not easily articulated in words that seek to convey this type of understanding. It would be misleading to cynically collapse this into a naïve perception of authenticity.

Gibson’s approach to fiction is salient to the study of rock music, and highlights a theme that has been implicit in our argument in this essay: approaches to authenticity in the study of rock music are too often based on assumptions of literalism and realism. This is obvious in Moore’s study in which he makes assumptions about the literal way that listeners and fans might hear, respond to, and perceive musicians, and then judges the imaginations of fans to be a false perception rather than inspired creation. Realism and literalism have hampered the study of many sub-genres of rock (notably punk), when it is assumed that songs and styles must inevitably express ascribed or attributed identities, inside group membership of a subculture, or local political and economic circumstances.

If we extend this train of thought, then it does not really matter whether Mumford or Little Richard or PJ Harvey or Nina Hagen are “real” or “fake” but that they afford (or can create) an experience that we call authentic in terms of our ability to empathetically occupy their perspective. This is partly what Springsteen, Harvey, and Byrne were alluding to in different ways when they spoke of their narratives and songs being based on imagination rather than real experience. Springsteen uses poetic realism and artistic devices to adopt the voices of various protagonists in narratives and to sing of incidents that he publicly acknowledges he has never personally experienced. Byrne uses ritualistic performance, choreography, and costume that are no less “real” in the way they connect with the imagination of audiences. Harvey uses techniques from the art of fiction and reflects upon whether she can “inhabit” song narratives when performing at a specific point in her life.

Attempting to theorize the authentic relationship away as fakery, fraud, ideology, delusion, and myth assumes a too realistic and literal approach to what musicians are doing, and what we are hearing, experiencing, and comprehending. Following Gibson, it may be more instructive to argue that engaging with music and musicians has parallels with the way people relate to poetry and literature, and art more generally. The author [Yu Hua](#) has written, “If literature truly possesses a mysterious power, I think perhaps it is

precisely this: that one can read a book by a writer of a different time, a different country, a different race, a different language, and a different culture and there encounter a sensation that is one's very own" (61). Such thoughts resonate with the way Sarfraz Manzoor gained his sense of self and identity through the music of Bruce Springsteen. Arriving in England as a young child of Pakistani parents, he grew up in the largely Muslim area of Bury Park, Luton (about 30 miles from London), feeling neither British nor Pakistani. After Sikh friend Amolak introduced him to Springsteen, he developed a sense of identity, along with aspirations and values through his immersion in the songs of Bruce Springsteen, as detailed in his memoirs (Manzoor).

The reduction of popular music making and listening to narrowly ascribed generic identity labels (whether of race, ethnicity, gender, age, and nation) may be strategically important in contributing to struggles for cultural recognition and political equality. But equally, the creative imagination is important for showing how an experience of empathy can reveal the contingencies of such identities, and the possibilities for transcending them . . . a dream that takes us beyond this intervention into debates about authenticity in rock music.

Conclusion

Bruce Springsteen used the term "post-authenticity" when referring to musicians and their audiences being aware of how performers present their own autobiographies, identities, and social histories to the public in ways that blur any simple distinction between real/ imaginary, documentary/ drama, fact/ fiction, and authentic/ artificial. Some of the most successful popular music is acclaimed for the very way that it deeply connects with people yet simultaneously allows release into imaginary worlds and identities: Bowie's Starman is as real as Joni Mitchell's Californian romances. Bowie was not "authentically" the image of the Starman, Ziggy, or Thin White Duke, but the fan could share in his theatrical imagination and fantasy. There was a genuine experience of empathy. There was no fake to see through because it was on the surface and in the performance. Similarly, people all over the world could empathize with the specifics of the love affairs documented on *Blue*. When we see and hear things from this perspective, the distinctions between the folk, Modernist, and Romantic approaches to authenticity are less relevant than the empathy that both musicians establish with their fans.

In the end, what matters is not what authenticity is (a visual representation, a sound, a gesture, a fabricated meaning) but what it does. And, what it does is allow us to express ourselves in specific ways, connect with people in particular places, and explain our understanding of other people. The meaning and concrete practice of authenticity is also not fixed. It changes historically and geographically. This means that the contexts and circumstances within which authenticities are enacted and experience change. For example, the sense of a "rock community," the idea of the star self as an "invention," the intimacy and empathy of audience/ practitioner relationships are now played out in the realm of social media. We do not know where this might lead, but it follows a long history.

Authenticity should not be collapsed into other terms, but we should be aware of how its meaning changes in relation to the lexicon we use to generalize about our lives and musical experiences (community, invention, selling out, identity, intimacy, empathy

etc.). Ideas and concepts of authenticity evolve in different locations, both in relation to a musician's individual expressivity and invention, as well as in the way that relationships with audiences (whether the identities of individuals or collectivities), create and sustain communities and beliefs.

The way audiences empathize with music and musicians is like the way people relate to and engage with fictional characters, circumstances, and actions in novels, and, as such, is a charged emotional and an imaginative response. Pacé Frith, what is important is not whether the magic is real or not, but that people experience it. This is the authenticity that both musicians and audiences live their lives by.

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Pete Astor is a musician, writer and educator. He led Creation Records' groups The Loft and The Weather Prophets, releasing records that helped define the sound of the label and the emerging Indie genre. He has gone on to a lengthy solo career since then; writing, recording and releasing music on a range of labels including Matador, Heavenly, and Warp. He has written a study of Richard Hell for Bloomsbury's 33/3rd series, as well as writing for the *New Musical Express* and *Popular Music*. He is Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Westminster.

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