
STUDIES IN MUSIC
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History, Genre and Fandom:

Popular Music Studies at the Turn of the Century

Histoire, genre et fanatisme:

Études de la musique populaire au tournant du siècle

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The Politics of Academic Fandom in the Study of Popular Music

Melissa West and Charity Marsh

Preface

Although written in Spring 2000 during a time when we were doctoral students at York University, the issues taken up throughout this paper are still very much relevant in the lives of graduate students, junior faculty and researchers a decade later. Within the discipline of Popular Music Studies today, we continue to see problematic gendered readings of fandom, genre, performance practice, instrumentation, media representations, etc., as well as firmly entrenched canons around who/what *deserves* to be researched and who/what *makes* it into the curriculum for popular music courses.

Introduction

Over the past year, we have presented several papers both individually and as a team on the popular musicians Madonna and Björk at conferences of varying disciplines. A common response to our work is the concern that our analysis is facilitated through our status as “fans.” Our reaction is yes, our fandom has an obvious subjective impact on what and how we choose to research, yet is any scholarship ever objective? And why is this a problem? Are we not capable of engaging in thoughtful and critical analysis on a subject simply because we are fans?

One of poststructuralism’s goals is the de-centring of the unified subject. Through our various social and political identities, as both fan and scholar, we occupy the contradictory space of the de-centred subject. Postmodernism is concerned with subverting the distinction between high and low culture. With Roland Barthes’ influential article “Death of the Author” (1977) we see the movement away from a privileging of the author-god to reader response. As a result, should fan response to all forms of popular music *not* be taken up in the academy? Feminist methodologies advocate “the personal is political” in fact validating one’s own experience—or in this case, one’s own fandom.

Although personal experience is essential to feminist scholarship, it is imperative in the academic world to link these experiences to theoretical concepts. This often proves difficult for those of us researching women musicians and challenging existing hegemonic structures. As scholars studying in the field of popular music, we are not exclusively making reference to the canon of male rockers and writers, but we are also establishing the relevance of our own personal experience as women engaging with women musicians.

When combining the personal and theoretical in the field of popular music studies, the seriousness of our work is questioned. Interest in popular music is often considered a youth phenomenon, which casts doubt on the legitimacy accredited to it by academics. Because of our age, gender and status as junior researchers, we are often labelled as "teenage girls," restricted by the assumptions that we are unable to construct informed critical opinions or analyses on issues relating to our interest in popular music.

Methodology

In this paper, we attempt to make sense of our own fandom through simultaneous personal narratives by addressing a series of questions. What does it mean to be a fan? What does it mean to be women fans in academia? What does it mean to be labelled a fan by an academic? And where is this labelling taking place? Publicly at conferences, in classrooms? At what point in our lives is our fandom being questioned? Why are only some forms of fandom problematized while other academic performances of fandom remain unquestioned? How are we attempting to make sense of these questions? Why are we exploring our identity as fans?

The term fan is linked to popular culture; something devalued for its mass following and mass consumption as "mindless drivel." Academia remains weary of popular culture as a valuable area of study. The fact that we are women studying women musicians in a field dominated by male scholars (often studying male musicians) only serves to negate the seriousness of our engagement and subject matter. Trinh Minh-ha problematizes male authority over female subjectivities:

Having always assumed the right to speak for the other, men obviously didn't think about expressing the male condition in their works. Besides, isn't it redundant to try to prove literary virility in an already virile language? These questions

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remain foreign to the one who, in his limited world, moves about as master (Trinh Minh-ha 1991:123).

The idea behind her words highlights the dominant ideology of patriarchy and the silencing of women's voices by men.

Labelling someone a fan carries multiple stereotypes including young, hysterical, mindless and psychotic: "Women's attempts to be heard are outbursts named as neurosis . . . and her 'outbursts' are used as weapons against her by men who remain silent. When her cries ring out, they wound her, and she is reduced to silence" (Davies *et al.* 1997:66). Naming us "fans" works to delegitimize our scholarship and attempts to create notions of female deviance; our research is not to be trusted. At a time in our early academic careers when we are presenting papers and building reputations, being identified as "fans" holds serious, often negative implications for us. We must consider what being labelled as fans is going to mean for future opportunities in hiring and publications. These questions develop in the intellectual environment of academia and point to issues concerning validation of work through funding and grants, institutions where we are competing against our peers to prove our own work as having merit.

In order to explore these issues, we will engage in personal reflections of our positions, investments and fandom. Why do we choose to study the subjects we do? We come to this research because our work has been called into question and these criticisms are founded in an assumption that our investment as fans in our subjects implies we cannot be critical.

Personal Narratives: Melissa's Narrative

It has been said that fandom is linked to feelings of nostalgia. In my earliest memory of participating in Madonna's music, I was an eleven-year old girl, laughing, playing, listening to Madonna and making up dance routines in the back yard with my three younger sisters and two other friends. I went in the house with Lesley and continued the camaraderie, singing the chorus of "Like a Virgin." Lesley—absolutely mortified, presumably because we were within earshot of our parents—put her hand over her mouth and signalled me to stop singing.

"What?" I asked naïvely, "What's wrong?"

"Don't sing that song!" Lesley replied.

"Why not?" I asked.

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Lesley quickly grabbed me, put her mouth to my ear and whispered the meaning of virgin. She proceeded to give me a misinformed definition of virgin that did not involve abstinence. My jaw dropped and I gasped. This put Madonna on a whole new level: she was about sex and at eleven I was pretty sure that was bad—so bad that she was good. From this point on, I saw Madonna on a whole new spine-tingling level; she became much more thrilling. I was both stunned and horrified by my new finding that Madonna sang about sex. I wondered what other secret meanings hid behind her lyrics.

Most fan narratives such as this would continue with how my eye-opening experience sparked a life-long pursuit of consumerism centred on Madonna. In fact, all throughout my childhood and adolescence, I never owned one of Madonna's albums. Although I experienced Madonna on MuchMusic, I was much more involved in playing the piano and consuming male pop stars such as Wham and Tears for Fears. My conservatory-style training was not overly conducive to remaining an active part of popular culture and when I entered my undergraduate degree in music at Wilfrid Laurier, I completely gave up what I was told was "mindless" popular music in favour of the more "sophisticated" art music.¹ It wasn't until the second year of my masters, when I took a course in popular music, that I felt I had permission from academia to return to popular music.² That year, I left McMaster and began my Ph.D. studies at York University.

During my first week at York, I introduced myself to many people including classmates and professors. One of the most common questions following one's introductions is in fact an inquiry about identity, "And what is your area of research?" Subtext—"what the hell do you think you are going to write for your dissertation?" I remember feeling tremendous pressure every time the

¹ Conservatory musical training focuses exclusively on art music. Within this system of study, popular music is deemed mindless and worthless measured against art music. Such restrictive policies on the object of study maintain dominant forms of power and at the same time value only certain types of knowledge, ignoring other ways of knowing.

² After five years of studying music in the university, this was the first opportunity I had to study popular music. This clearly points to the fact that popular music takes up a marginal space in the university and in fact restricted the type of research I was able to do until the last year of my masters.

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question was raised. As a graduate student not defining my research area created an incredible lack of identity.

I bought Madonna's *Ray of Light* in 1998 purely out of curiosity as to how this musician and indeed pop-icon had maintained such longevity in the popular music industry. This marked the turning point in my fandom. I began writing about Madonna for my courses and I could not stop. Interestingly enough, it was at this point that the stereotypical acts associated with fandom began. Not only did I start to build an impressive CD collection, but I also began acquiring information about Madonna in any way, shape or form that I could muster.

Fantasy is another stereotypical act associated with fandom, and although I would at first deny that I fantasize in any way about Madonna, upon further reflection I realize that I have on occasion enacted fantasy-like situational daydreams in my head. At the end of my first year at York, I gave two separate papers on Madonna in a room with a mural including Madonna sporting her cone bra. In my fantasy, preceding the presentations, I moved towards the picture of Madonna, kissed her and proceeded to give my paper. I never actually played out this scenario, but somehow just knowing that Madonna was present in the form of a picture meant that she would understand my truth despite whatever questions and criticisms followed. Hinerman suggests that:

Fantasies are, then, one way humans have to negotiate a troubling situation. They bridge the gap that is created when desire is prohibited but the longing for full satisfaction is still there. Fantasies allow us to close the distance between what we need or want and what we can have (Hinerman 1992:115).

Once again the scholarly context was responsible for the stereotypical behaviour as it was in the troubling space of academia that I called upon on fantasy to cope with a difficult situation.

In closing my narrative, I feel it was academia and all of its demands—to create a unified self with a research area, to be part of a community, and the pressure to be successful in that competitive environment—that nurtured my relationship and fandom with Madonna. It is interesting to note that in my case, the very institution that criticizes fandom fostered its development.

Charity's Narrative

I fell in love with Björk's voice the first time I heard it: the track was "Birthday" (1987), the band was the Sugarcubes and Björk was the lead singer. I followed the band to its demise and eagerly moved on with Björk into her solo career. Her first independent album, *Debut* (1993), was an eclectic mix of many musical styles and a little techno thrown in for fun. I was hooked on her eccentric musical style, on her crazy vocables—I was hooked on Björk.

As a fan I loved all of her solo albums, but late one night in December of 1997, I heard *Homogenic* (1997) for the first time. If I had ever doubted my status as a Björk fan, it would never happen again. The complexities of this minimalist album moved me in a way that I had never felt before. Unlike the "patchwork"-type previous albums, *Homogenic* was like one whole comprised of many layers. At this precise moment, I knew I wanted to study this album, my attraction to it and to the woman who was embracing what seemed to be at least two extremes, nature and technology, while playing into but also sometimes resisting the stereotypes of each.

It was not until I was immersed in graduate studies that I was confronted by the idea that my fandom might actually be considered a hindrance to my scholarly work and/or my academic pursuits might interfere with my status as a Björk fan. After all, the scholastic path I chose to pursue evolved significantly from my personal relationship with Björk's music and my desire to understand how and why this music affected me. I was and continue to be perplexed by the perpetuation of the academic/fan dichotomy, which is founded on a system of categorization plagued by the conventional definitions of gender leaving little room for ambiguity. This is not the game I wish to play, nor the rules I want to play by. I can only hope that this journey will stimulate something other, perhaps a continuum, a space where the line is not drawn down the middle, possibly where lines are not drawn at all.

As a woman, a fan of a woman musician, and a woman scholar studying women musicians, I challenge the dominant ideology in a number of ways. Not only have I expressed my fondness for Björk's music but I have openly stated that I do not desire to be her, as is often the case with fans, but rather, I desire her. Negoti-

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ating the space of my desire(s) for Björk as both a fan and a scholar is complicated by my gender. Female desire continues to be negated in this society, which preserves the virgin/whore dichotomy. The very existence of female sexuality acts as a challenge to male authority and lesbian desire explicitly threatens patriarchal order. By acknowledging my desire for Björk through my fandom and incorporating it into my academic research and critical analysis of her and her music, I am disrupting the heteronormative foundations of the study of music, and all its subsequent branches.

As an ethnomusicologist, I have been instructed that in order to do “valuable” work, it is essential to *immerse* myself in the culture and practice of my subject(s). Nevertheless, I have also been criticized for being *too close* to the subject of my research, *too much* of a fan and thus lacking the space to maintain an academic approach. And although there seems to be validity in both suggestions, I have to wonder from whose experiences the criticism stems. It seems unlikely that I, or anyone else for that matter, would spend a great deal of time with a subject that was not interesting to me. I have learned from my own experience that it is crucial for me to enjoy the subject of my research in order to produce “good” work.

Björk moves me. Her music moves me. Why should I not be allowed to express and examine my desire(s) for the subject that I study in an academic setting? What will become of my reputation as a scholar when I refuse to subvert these desires?

Through an immersion into fan culture, I have found another layer of my desire, one which represents a threat to the very structure that tries to limit and contain female desire, and even more so my queer desire(s). From my desire(s), I create theory; this is the theory from which my scholarly work evolves at this point in this time in this context, not uncritically, and not without thought and contention. By moving beyond the academic/fan dichotomy, I am able to press the boundaries of what it means to be a fan and challenge the rigidity of what it means to be a scholar.

Closing Quote

“To know one’s self in this way, to ‘find a real name’ to use Deleuze’s term, is to open up the possibilities of selves rather than to contain them” (Davies et al. 1997:65).

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