

Seeing Is Believing: Live Performance and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock Culture

PHILIP AUSLANDER

In *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, Theodore Gracyk argues persuasively that the primary object of rock music as an aesthetic form is the recording, not live musical performance. Arguing that musical instruments are not the primary materials of rock, as they are of other musics, Gracyk offers the following analysis:

The vast majority of the time, the audience for rock music listens to *speakers* delivering *recordings*. Exploring the limitations and possibilities of the recording process, crafting music in those terms, rock's primary materials are often the available recording and playback equipment. Guitars, pianos, voices, and so on became secondary materials. Consequently, rock music is not essentially a performing art, no matter how much time rock musicians spend practicing on their instruments or playing live. (74-75)

Therefore, "studio recordings have become the standard for judging live performances" and "musicians are usually re-creating music [in live performances], not making it" (84, 77).

Gracyk is clearly correct: there is no question but that rock exists primarily as recorded music and that rock culture¹ is organized around recordings. Indeed, rock culture as such can be said to have come into existence partly as a result of the invention of the 45 rpm record in 1948, which made popular music cheaper to produce and easier to integrate into social life than had the more cumbersome and fragile 78 rpm discs (Curtis 44-45). It is equally the case, however, that rock music *is* performed live and that, within rock culture, such performance is important and demanded. If we accept Gracyk's characterization of rock music as primarily a recorded form, how do we account for the importance of live performance within rock culture? Looking at the production side of rock, this question appears to be easy to answer: the primary function of live performance is to promote the sale of recordings. But even this self-evident proposition becomes less plausible in light of Gracyk's analysis: if rock is primarily a recorded music, why shouldn't the presence of the recordings on the radio suffice as a means of promoting them? And how exactly could live performances, which Gracyk insists belong to a different aesthetic order than recordings, serve to promote them? These questions intertwine with a basic question framed from the point of view of reception: if rock fans are primarily engaged with recordings, what need does live performance fulfill for them?

Gracyk's own handling of the question of live performance is not altogether consistent. Initially, he describes the pleasures of live performance as deriving from interaction with others: the individual listener has the opportunity to commune with fellow fans and to experience an illusory bond with the performer (78). On the other hand, he lumps live performance together with other visual representations of rock, including coffee-table books, magazine spreads, album covers, and television, saying "A major trap is to buy into the imagery of rock promotion" (75). According to Gracyk, since all of these media tend to represent rock musicians primarily as live performers and not as the studio artists they truly are, they are all guilty of a pernicious misrepresentation of the music. The problem with Gracyk's argument is that most rock *recordings* are guilty of the same misrepresentation. Only a few rock records foreground the artifice of their studio construction; most are made to sound like performances that

could have taken place, even if they really didn't (and couldn't). Simon Frith's description of his own listening experience can probably stand as typical for that of a sophisticated rock fan: "I listen to records in the full knowledge that what I hear is something that never existed, that never could exist, as a 'performance,' something happening in a single time and space; nevertheless, it is now happening, in a single time and space: it is thus a performance and I hear it as one . . ." (*Performing Rites* 211). If Frith is right when he says that rock recordings create the impression of being performances taking place in a single space and time, even for a listener who is fully aware of their origins, then, for Gracyk, they should be just as deceptive and pernicious as visual representations of rock which depict musicians as performers rather than at work in the studio. The grounds on which Gracyk wants to dismiss live performance and other visual representations of rock would seem to be grounds on which to dismiss the music itself. If rock music can be seen as a form worthy of aesthetic appreciation, despite (or because of?) its industrial origins and commercial character, the visual culture that surrounds the music must be seen as contributing to that aesthetic experience, not merely as a systematic misrepresentation of the music whose sole purpose is the cynical promotion of an attractive illusion. The visual culture of rock is neither more nor less cynical than the music itself: like rock records, live performances, photographs, and so on, are products of the commercial apparatus of the music industry that contribute to the impression that rock music is a performing art. However inaccurate that impression may be, it defines the experience of rock for its listeners.

I want to suggest that the visual artifacts of rock serve a particular function within rock culture and that live performance plays a pivotal role in this regard. The function to which I am alluding is that of establishing the *authenticity* of the music for the rock fan. Before proceeding, some definitional discussion is in order.

First, *authenticity*. This clearly relates to questions of production but not to a thought-through theory; "inauthentic," that is to say, is a term that can be applied evaluatively within genres which are, in production terms, "inauthentic" by

definition—fans can distinguish between authentic and inauthentic Eurodisco, and what is being described by implication is not how something was actually produced but a more inchoate feature of the music itself, a perceived quality of sincerity and commitment. . . . What is it about a record that makes us say, “I just don’t believe it!” (my reaction to Paul Simon’s *Graceland*, for example)? . . . This is obviously related somehow to the ways in which we judge people’s sincerity generally; it is a human as well as a musical judgment. And it also reflects our extra-musical beliefs—what I already knew about Paul Simon obviously had an effect on how I heard his music (and new knowledge—new music—might mean I changed my mind). (Frith, *Performing Rites* 71)

Frith makes several important points here: that authenticity can be heard in the music, yet is an effect not just of the music itself but also of prior musical and extra-musical knowledge and beliefs; that what counts as authentic varies among popular musical genres. Because I am focusing here on the set of musical subgenres called “rock,” I will consider the concept of authenticity as it is understood within that cultural context. Historically, the term “rock” denotes a kind of popular music that originated in the 1960s (Gracyk places its emergence around 1965 [7]), as distinct from its 1950s predecessor, rock and roll, for which authenticity may not have had the same meaning. Lawrence Grossberg suggests that while there have always been “many forms of rock authenticity,” the concept of authenticity has also always been exclusionary: “At every moment in its history, rock fans have always identified some music which, along with their [sic] associated cultural apparatuses and audiences, are dismissed, not merely as bad or inferior rock but somehow as not really rock at all” (“Media Economy” 202).² The name most frequently used for rock’s Other is “pop.”³ The ideological distinction between rock and pop is precisely the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, the sincere and the cynical, the genuinely popular and the slickly commercial, the potentially

resistant and the necessarily coopted, art and entertainment.⁴ From the point of view of rock ideology, there can be no such thing as “authentic Eurodisco,” for example: all Eurodisco is condemned as intrinsically inauthentic pop music.⁵ Gracyk does not take this aspect of rock culture into account, preferring to opt for a broad definition of rock that would encompass both hard rock and disco (7). While it is fair to say that rock is a diverse stylistic category with fuzzy borders, it is nevertheless true that, within rock culture, the music is often defined in terms of an exclusionary concept of authenticity (and Gracyk certainly goes too far when he identifies Whitney Houston as a rock musician![222]). The concept of rock authenticity is linked with the romantic bent of rock culture, whose adherents want to imagine rock music as truly expressive of the artists’ souls and psyches, and as consistently politically and culturally oppositional. The romantic ideals of rock music are nicely expressed in Neil Young’s song “Tonight’s the Night (Part 1)” in which he sings of a deceased roadie: “Late at night when the people were gone/He used to pick up my guitar/And sing a song in a shaky voice/That was real as the day was long.” These few lines summarize the mythology of self-expression central to rock in terms of authenticity, anti-commodification (the “real” singer takes the stage after the paying customers have left), and populism (since the roadie is described as “a working man” who also makes music). Gracyk points out the logical untenability of rock romanticism, which wants to treat industrial products as individual expression and cultural resistance (175-206). Gracyk’s analysis notwithstanding, the fact that the criteria for rock authenticity are imaginary has never prevented them from functioning in a very real way for rock fans.

I want to be very clear on one point. Taken on its own terms, rock authenticity is an essentialist concept, in the sense that rock fans treat authenticity as an essence that is either present or absent in the music itself, and they may well debate particular musical works in those terms. It is my intention to recognize this usage and explore its implications. In my own discourse, however, I treat rock authenticity as an *ideological* concept and as a discursive effect. My approving citation of Frith’s definition notwithstanding, I will argue that authenticity is not simply present in the music itself and will also emphasize its cultural, rather

than ethical, dimension. In other words, I posit that the creation of the effect of authenticity in rock is a matter of culturally determined convention, not an expression of essence. It is also a result of industrial practice: the music industry specifically sets out to endow its products with the necessary signs of authenticity.

The specific semiotic markers of authenticity vary by musical genre and subgenre. Tightly choreographed unison dance steps may be necessary for a soul vocal group to establish itself as authentic, but would be a sign of inauthenticity in a rock group because they belie the effect of spontaneity rock audiences value. Whereas acoustic playing is a sign of authenticity for the blues-rock and folk-rock of the 1960s and 1970s, it does not function that way for the more recent rock subgenre of industrial noise, which employs only highly-amplified sounds not always produced by conventional rock instruments. In order to appear authentic, many British rockers sing in American accents, thus acknowledging the historical origins of their musical genre (Durant 112). Female hardrockers frequently employ the aggressive vocal inflections and macho physical gestures and postures associated with male musicians because that vocabulary is the established iconography of authenticity for that particular rock subgenre.

Not only do the signs of rock authenticity differ among musical subgenres, they also change over time.

Rock must constantly change to survive; it must seek to reproduce its authenticity in new forms, in new places, in new alliances. It must constantly move from one center to another, transforming what had been authentic into the inauthentic in order to constantly project its claim to authenticity. (Grossberg, *We Gotta* 209)

Rock's authenticity effects are thus dependent on the nomination of something to serve as the inauthentic Other, whether that thing is current pop music or earlier rock. In this respect, rock ideology is conservative: authenticity is often located in current music's relationship to an earlier, "purer" moment in a mythic history of the music. In the 1970s, some rock groups (Queen, for instance) wrote in the liner notes to their albums that they did not

use synthesizers, thus stressing their connection to the traditional instrumentation of roots rock ("real" electric guitars, drums, etc.). The advent of digital musical instruments, however, changed the historical status of the synthesizer relative to authenticity:

Playing analogue synthesizers is now a mark of authenticity, where it was once a sign of alienation—to pop iconography the image of musicians standing immobile behind synths signified coldness. . . . Now it is the image of a technician hunched over a computer terminal that is problematic—but that, like the image of the synth player, can and will change. (Goodwin, "Sample" 269)

Rock authenticity is performative, in Judith Butler's sense of that term:⁶ rock musicians achieve and maintain their effect of authenticity by continuously citing in their music and performance styles the norms of authenticity for their particular rock subgenre and historical moment, and these norms change along with changes in the prevailing discourse of authenticity. The interplay of these factors is complex, however. In her analysis of *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, the Rolling Stones' attempt at psychedelia, Sheila Whiteley points out that because the Stones' authenticity derives from their roots in American rhythm and blues, their switch to psychedelic rock came off as forced and inauthentic. In this case, the group's own musical history was at odds with their effort to cite the stylistic norm of that moment in rock history (90-99).

Grossberg locates rock authenticity in the music's sound, not the visual aspects of its performance:⁷

The authenticity of rock has always been measured by its sound, and most commonly, by its voice. Obviously, given the contexts in which rock was made available to the majority of its fans, it is not surprising that its ideology would focus on sound. . . . The eye has always been suspect in rock culture; after all, visually, rock

often borders on the inauthentic. . . . It was here—in its visual presentation—that rock often most explicitly manifested its resistance to the dominant culture, but also its sympathies with the business of entertainment. (“Media Economy” 204)

Like Gracyk, Grossberg suggests that only the music itself as it is experienced on records can be treated seriously, that the visual culture of rock reflects its imbrication with a venal entertainment industry. All aspects of rock culture are products of this industry, however: the music; the visual artifacts that surround it, including live performances; even rock ideology and the effect of authenticity itself are manufactured to a very large extent. It makes little sense to separate the music from these other discourses, as if it transcends its origins in ways that they cannot.

Historically, one consequence of the reification of music in recordings is the century-old separation of the aural experience of music from its visual experience. The critical impact of the gramophone on popular music when it became widely available in the 1890s was “a vital shift in the experience of listening to music: the replacement of an audio-visual event with a primarily audio one, sound without vision” and it is from this originary point that the culture of popular music, and its emphasis on the aural aspects of music performance, has evolved (Laing 7-8). Nevertheless, sound recording certainly did not render the visual aspects of music irrelevant; indeed, listening to recordings may always be a visual as well as aural experience. Evan Eisenberg distinguishes the experience of monophonic and stereophonic recordings by saying that “Stereo . . . arrays the musicians before you in empty space. . . . The introduction of stereo . . . changed the phenomenology of the phonograph by adding a spatial, and hence a *visual* aspect . . . ” (64-65; my emphasis). Eisenberg’s point is an important one, though I doubt that monophonic sound completely lacks a spatial aspect—even when a recording is designed to be played through a single speaker, the arrangement of sounds still evokes spatial concepts like foreground and background. Even when sound is divorced from sight by virtue of technological mediation, the aural experience evokes a visual one: “every mode of record listening leaves us with a need for

something, if not someone, to see and touch" (Eisenberg 65).

This visual experience of recorded music is generically specific: Eisenberg argues that "rock listeners, who have no preconception as to how live musicians should be deployed" (65) tend to prefer to listen through headphones, which give the impression that the music is inside them rather than emanating from an exterior space. Although Eisenberg does not say so explicitly, I assume he is contrasting rock with classical music and jazz, each of which uses well-known spatial configurations of musicians. While it is true that rock recordings frequently contain "exaggerated stereo effects," I think that Eisenberg is wrong—rock listeners *do* visualize the musicians while listening to recordings: "to hear music is to see it performed, on stage, with all the trappings" (Frith, *Performing Rites* 211). Precisely because there are fewer conventions for the arrangement of rock musicians on stage than there are for a symphony orchestra (though there are some: drums upstage center, for example) and because rock recordings frequently generate an irrational stereo field (that is, an imaginary aural space for which there could be no physical analogue), our ability to visualize the performance of rock music as we listen to it is dependent on the availability of visual artifacts that show us what the musicians look like in performance. Rock "has always stressed the visual as a necessary part of its apparatus—in performance, on record covers, in magazine and press photographs, and in advertising" (Goodwin, *Dancing* 8), and it is from such sources that these images derive. It is clear that such images help to define, but also must conform to, the visual standards of rock authenticity prevalent at a given historical moment. Whereas it was possible in 1964 for the Beatles to be a credible rock group while wearing identical "mop-top" haircuts, tailored suits, and "Beatle boots" in photographs, including those on their record covers, that was no longer possible by the psychedelic era. Hence, the inclusion of pictures of the long-haired and bearded Beatles packaged with the so-called White Album (1968). Similarly, the members of the Jefferson Airplane would not have had much credibility as a psychedelic group had they appeared on their album covers dressed in business suits.

It is the case that this kind of visual evidence is not enough to assure the authenticity of a rock group. In photographs, members of the Ohio Express, a late '60s bubblegum rock group, were

appropriately hirsute and displayed Carnaby Street fashions, yet the group never actually existed; it was the studio creation of its producers.⁸ Grossberg's claim that "the authenticity of rock has always been measured by its sound" is nevertheless misleading. Sound alone cannot establish rock authenticity (or inauthenticity) any more than visuals alone. It is not self-evident from listening to a Monkees album such as *Pisces, Aquarius, Capricorn and Jones, Ltd.* (1968) that their music is inauthentic. In terms of style, sound, and lyrical content, songs on this album compare favorably with the work of the Beatles, Crosby, Stills, and Nash, and the Jefferson Airplane.⁹ (It may be tempting to argue that this plurality of styles is itself evidence of inauthenticity but a certain musical eclecticism was in fact a hallmark of the psychedelic era, nowhere more evident than on the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* [1967].) The Monkees' inauthenticity is not directly audible on their records but is a function of other knowledges that the rock fan brings to the record (e.g., that the Monkees were created for television, that they did not play their own instruments, etc.). Whiteley's examination of *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, cited earlier, is one of the best close analyses of rock sound in terms of authenticity. On the basis of its lyrics and musical structures, she concludes that the album is a calculated attempt at imitating the psychedelic style established by the Beatles on *Sergeant Pepper* and, therefore, inauthentic. Whiteley ends her discussion by saying that "there is a mismatch between the expectations generated by the [album's psychedelic] cover, the content, style and presentation [of the music itself]" (99), thus acknowledging that the album's visual aspects play a role in the creation of expectation and the determination of (in)authenticity. Would Whiteley have heard the music on the album differently if the album had had a different cover? I am suggesting that the determination of rock authenticity cannot be made on the basis of either visual or aural evidence alone, but only by considering both, and the relationship of one to the other in light of other knowledges the listener brings to bear.

While recordings and the visual artifacts of rock culture provide evidence of authenticity, only live performance can certify it for rock ideology. Live performance contributes to the process of authentication in two crucial ways. First, to be considered an authentic rocker, a musician must have a history as a live

performer, as someone who has paid those dues and whose current visibility is the result of earlier popularity with a local following. Pursuing rock's traditional career path, musicians must first establish themselves and find an audience through live performance; musicians are chosen to record by industry scouts on the basis of live performances. Subsequent moves from live performance at the local level to live performance at the national and international levels serve as indices of the musicians' popularity with audiences and status within the industry (Frith, "Picking Up" 111-112). Even in the case of an act like the Beatles, who opted out of live performance very shortly after ascending to international fame to become exclusively a studio group, the fact that they had once been a performing band (and, conceivably, might be again) and that they had made their original reputation through live performance lent authority and authenticity to their recordings.¹⁰ In an essay of 1968, for example, rock critic Albert Goldman refers to the Beatles as "the *best costumed*, best produced, most versatile, and technically resourceful of rock bands" (60; my emphasis). Goldman's reference to costuming implies a perception of the Beatles as a performing unit even though they had abandoned live performance several years earlier. Similarly, continual rumors in the mid-1970s that Steely Dan, a group known to exist primarily in the studio, would be embarking on a tour helped the group maintain credibility with the rock audience, even though the tour never materialized. On the other hand, groups lacking a history of live performance and, like the Monkees or the Ohio Express, known (or suspected) to have been created only as studio aggregations, were dismissed by rock critics and fans as mere pop even when they did perform live.¹¹ Whereas the Beatles retained their authenticity even after they stopped performing live because they possessed a history as live performers and Steely Dan were given the benefit of doubt, the Monkees could never be considered authentic, no matter how many live concerts they gave, because they were known to have originated as a synthetic, televisual group, not as musicians with an "organically" developed history of live performance. It is for this reason that the producer of a recent group, Radish, "wanted Radish to build up a local following around Dallas prior to the release of the band's first album. . . . He felt that Radish should be from Texas—from somewhere real, and not just from the

music industry, like a nineties version of the Monkees" (Seabrook 80-81). The fact that the evidence of authenticity results from a calculated effort of the promotional apparatus does not prevent it from counting for rock fans. Nor should it, given the commodity context in which all aspects of rock culture are produced.

The second, and most critical, reason that live performance enables the determination of authenticity is that it is only in live performance that the listener can ascertain that a group that looks authentic in photographs and sounds authentic on recordings really *is* authentic in terms of rock ideology. In the context of his argument that the locus of rock authenticity is in sound, not sight, Grossberg claims that

the importance of live performance lies precisely in the fact that it is only here that one can see the actual production of the sound, and the emotional work carried in the voice. It is not the visual appearance of rock that is offered in live performance but the concrete production of the music as sound. The demand for live performance has always expressed the desire for the visual mark (and proof) of authenticity. ("Media Economy" 204)

Although I believe that Grossberg has put his finger on a matter of vital importance in understanding the function of live performance within rock culture, his insistence that live performance is not visual but auditory in nature again reflects the anti-visual bias I have identified in his and Gracyk's work, the insistence that the visual is necessarily inauthentic in a way that the auditory is not.¹² I agree emphatically with Grossberg that live rock performance is precisely about establishing the authenticity of the recorded sound, but surely this must involve not just the "concrete production" of that sound, but also visual evidence of that production by musicians whose appearance suggests that they are its legitimate makers. It is for this reason that producers of rock recordings will not hire a group on the basis of a demonstration tape alone, but always insist on seeing the group perform live.

Because it is well-known within rock culture that the sound

is manufactured in the recording studio, the visual aspects of rock music performance do not work merely as a secondary confirmation of an authenticity established primarily in the rock sound, as Grossberg would have it. Prior to *seeing* a band perform live, the rock fan cannot be sure that their music really is *their* music. The visual evidence of live performance, the fact that those sounds can be produced live by the appropriate musicians, serves to authenticate music as legitimate rock and not synthetic pop in a way that cannot occur on the basis of the recording alone; only live performance can resolve the tension between rock's romantic ideology and the listener's knowledge that the music is produced in the studio. A provocative statement by Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys underlines the association of musical ability and live performance with rock and studio artifice with pop: "It's kinda macho nowadays to prove you can *cut it* live. I quite like proving we *can't* cut it live. We're a pop group, not a rock and roll group" (quoted in Goodwin, "Sample" 268). A case in point is that of the Beach Boys' well-known recording of "Good Vibrations" (1966), a performance pieced together with extreme care over numerous recording sessions and one of the most elegant and complex examples in popular music of what Eisenberg calls "phonography," the art of recorded music.¹³ The assertion of rock authenticity was particularly problematic for the Beach Boys, as their music, which derives as much from the pop tradition of vocal groups like The Four Freshmen as from the proto-rock and roll of Chuck Berry, has always been regarded somewhat suspiciously within rock culture, especially since it is associated with a reactionary cultural politics. The prosperous, suburban Southern California lifestyle of which it is an expression was not valued by the rock counterculture of the late 1960s. As Jim Curtis puts it, the Beach Boys, like President Lyndon Johnson, seemed to embody "an implicit belief in the frontier as the unending hegemony of white Protestant democracy" (117). In the mid-1960s, the word on "Good Vibrations" was that it was purely a studio product that could not possibly be performed live. Yet, a live recording of 1966 reveals the group struggling through the song before the single had even been released. A later live recording, of 1969, shows that, by that point, the group had mastered the ability to reproduce the sound of the recording—including some of its special effects—in a live setting, thus

enhancing their credibility with rock audiences at the height of the psychedelic era, a time when their musical style seemed hopelessly out of touch.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that the group's visual style had changed considerably, as well: in the late 1960s, the Beach Boys sported hippie garb, long hair, and beards in place of their previous uniform of striped shirts and clean-cut hair styles.

An anecdote that circulated in the late 1960s summarizes much of what I'm saying here. According to this story, Jimi Hendrix toured with the Monkees as one of their backing musicians. Because the Monkees could not play their own instruments and wanted to disguise that fact, they placed Hendrix behind a curtain, hiding him from the audience and making it seem as if the Monkees were responsible for his guitar sound. At one fateful concert, the curtain fell away, revealing Hendrix and unmasking the Monkees as frauds. Though the story is false¹⁵ (Hendrix did tour the United States with the the Monkees briefly in 1967, but only as their opening act), it is very revealing of rock ideology and the premium it places on the ability to perform one's music live. From the perspective of rock ideology, the juxtaposition of Hendrix and the Monkees, artists placed at opposite ends of the spectrum of authenticity, is delicious, as is the way the revelation of the fraudulent results in the glorification of the genuine.¹⁶

The idea that live performance establishes the authenticity of the rock recording suggests a particular relationship between live and recorded music in that cultural context. In jazz and classical music, recorded and live performances are considered separate artforms. No concertgoer, for example, would expect the flutes in Khatchaturian's Second Symphony to be louder than the brass, as they are on Stokowski's recording (Eisenberg 153), and jazz fans expect the music they hear live to feature spontaneous inventions and improvisations different from those on recordings. The relationship between the live and the recorded within rock music, however, is different, precisely because live performances and recordings are *not* treated as fully separable artworks within rock culture. Gracyk argues that live performance and recordings are "two different media" (80) and goes on to claim that "Recording facilitates a certain indifference as to whether the music can be re-created in live performance" (84).

Gracyk's differentiation of live and recorded performances is valid in terms of his ontological argument, but not when consid-

ered in the context of rock culture. I have been arguing that rock fans and critics are not at all indifferent to whether the music can be re-created in live performance, that the ability to do precisely that is a hallmark ideological distinction between authentic rock and contrived pop.¹⁷ Listeners steeped in rock ideology are tolerant of studio manipulation only to the extent that they know or believe that the resulting sound can be reproduced on stage by the same performers.¹⁸ When that belief is substantiated, the music is authenticated. When it is shown (or even strongly suspected) to be false, the music is condemned to inauthenticity. While live and recorded performance are indeed different media, they are linked symbiotically in rock culture. Rather than existing as an autonomous artwork, the rock recording calls up the desire for a live performance that will serve to authenticate the sounds on the recording.¹⁹ It is this relationship that makes live performance a better way of marketing a recording than simply exposing the recording itself on the radio. In live performance, the rock audience is exposed to the music in a context that endorses it as authentic in the terms of rock ideology.²⁰ The concert answers the question raised implicitly by the recording.

Coda

Up to this point, I have been treating rock culture and ideology as cultural discourses that retain their currency after more than thirty years. There is reason to question whether or not this is the case, for there have been changes in rock culture over the last ten or more years that suggest that the values championed by rock ideology may have lost their hold. The Milli Vanilli scandal of 1990 may be seen as a watershed in this regard. The pop singing and dancing duo Milli Vanilli won the 1989 Best New Artist Grammy. The award was rescinded when it was disclosed not only that the group lip-synched to prerecorded vocals in live performances, but also that the voices on their award-winning recording were not their own. Milli Vanilli's young audience was not upset at their lip-synching. This is perfectly understandable in terms of the ideological distinction between rock and pop. Milli Vanilli was not a rock group; it was a pop dance group whose audience would not be expected to be concerned about authenticity. Rather it was their parents and parental surrogates

(such as the representatives who called for legislation and the attorneys who filed consumer fraud suits) who were disturbed. Jon Pareles, a *New York Times* popular music journalist, inveighing against the use of lip-synching, computer-programmed musical instruments, and other forms of automation in concert, and upholding the value of traditional live performance, referred to the entrance of these techniques into live performance as a paradigm shift. "I'm not ready for the new paradigm . . ." he wrote. "The spontaneity, uncertainty and ensemble coordination that automation eliminates are exactly what I go to concerts to see . . ." (25). Like Pareles, most commentators were adamantly opposed to the incursion of automation into live music performance.²¹

The intriguing aspect of the Milli Vanilli scandal is that commentators like Pareles did not simply dismiss it as the logical outcome of the pop audience's indifference to authenticity. It was seen, rather, as signifying a crisis in the ideology of authenticity with implications well beyond the specific case:

the Milli Vanilli lip-synching scandal of 1990 must be seen as the culmination of nearly a decade of concern over the status and legitimacy of live performance in an era of sequencers, samplers, and backing tapes. For critics the problem was not simply that musicians were trying to sound like their recordings when performing on stage (a longtime preoccupation among pop musicians) but that concerts had indeed become recordings. (Théberge 1997: 231)

It is clear, then, why Milli Vanilli was scandalous from the point of view of the rock ideology endorsed by these older commentators, even if not to their young listeners. It suggested the arrival of a new era of music performance in which the visual evidence of performance would have no relation to the production of the sound. The complementarity of recordings and live performances central to rock ideology had broken down with the consequence that live performance was deprived of its traditional authenticating function. Live concerts were now what recordings had always been: *simulations*—recreations of performances that

never took place, representations without referents in the real.²²

Frith and Grossberg both suggest that this change in music culture was anticipated by alterations in the structure of the music industry and its relation to other entertainment industries in the 1980s. Frith argues that the traditional career path, in which musicians worked their way up a career ladder from local performances and recordings to eventual stardom, had given way to an "irrational" system in which music is packaged by entertainment conglomerates and sold to a public that has evinced no previous demand for that music ("Picking Up" 113-114). Grossberg notes the same shift in industry patterns: "The new star does not need a history. The old model of a star building an ever-expanding audience while 'paying their dues' is being replaced by the immediate insertion of a figure into a position of stardom already waiting for them . . ." ("You [still] have to fight" 318). A history of live performance is no longer meaningful as a source of rock authentication; while some artists come up the traditional way, many do not, and the distinction seems not to matter to the audience.

The crisis in the ideology of rock authenticity is also reflected in the changing relationship of rock to television.²³ As Grossberg points out, rock music and television are traditionally opposed within rock ideology: "For many fans, television has often been seen as part of the dominant culture against which the rock culture is defined" ("Media Economy" 189).²⁴ Indeed, the aforementioned antagonism of the rock culture toward the Monkees derived precisely from the fact that not only were the Monkees a manufactured group, they were manufactured *for television*.²⁵ This antagonism toward television was fueled by an association of television with pop, rather than rock, and even extended to MTV, as Frith points out: "MTV became the target of hostility from the established rock audience. . . . It seemed to mean the replacement of rock values (sincerity, musical dexterity, live communion) with old pop conceits (visual style, gimmickry, hype) . . ." ("Afterword" 210).

Although it is tempting to describe music video as *causing* the devaluation of the live event as a marker of authenticity in rock music and, therefore, the collapse of the distinction between the live and the mediatized in that cultural realm, that temptation should be resisted. As Andrew Goodwin has shown, music

video and lip-synched concerts are not causally linked; rather, both are *symptoms* of changes in the culture and production of rock music after punk that were driven by the developments in the music industry already discussed, changes in musical style (British New Pop, the resurgence of dance music), and changes in musical technology.²⁶ 1981, the year of the MTV Music Television cable network's debut, also saw the refinement of the digital sampler and other high-tech, computerized musical instruments that resulted in what Goodwin calls "the displacement of the musician" in both the studio and the live concert (*Dancing* 32). "This argument suggests that the later development of acts such as Milli Vanilli was not a 'result' of MTV and music television. Rather, both Milli Vanilli and MTV were effects of the uses to which the new pop technologies were put" (*Dancing* 33).

The simulationist logic that now binds together live performance, recordings, and music video recapitulates the discourse of authenticity in another register. Goodwin insists that the live performance and the video do not mirror each other; rather, the referent of each is the commodity both promote: the sound recording (*Dancing* 47). While Goodwin is right to emphasize the promotional function of both concert and video in the economics of rock music, from the point of view of affect, the middle term to which the other two refer is the video, not the sound recording. Richard Dienst spells out how "the performative distinction between video clip transmission and the commodity object [the recording]" enables the video to carry out its promotional function without sacrificing its own ability "to occupy the primary sites of music consumption":

The video clip must somehow fail to be that other thing, the recording itself, even while giving every appearance of improving on it, expanding it, or giving it away free. Adding images turns out to be a form of subtraction: not only in the realm of sensory plenitude, but also in the mobilization of desire as a temporal vector leading (perhaps) to a moment of exchange at which value is at last realized for capitalist and consumer alike. (81)

In Dienst's subtle analysis, video is the primary experience of music in a mediatised culture. Because that experience is constructed to lack plenitude, the consumer seeks out the sound recording—not because it contains the musical experience to which the video refers but in order to complete the experience initiated by the video. This, of course, recapitulates the previous relationship between recordings and live performances, in which the listener needed recorded music to be completed and authenticated by live performance. The crucial difference is that now one recording (the video) creates desire for another recording, not for live performance of the music.

Goodwin notes that music videos frequently expose the apparatus of music-making; the particular iconography he cites is "the all-pervasive mise-en-scene of the rehearsal room/warehouse space in music video clips." Goodwin's argument is that representation of the sites where the music is made serves as "a guarantor of authenticity" (*Dancing 77*; original emphasis). Jody Berland observes that "with the emergence of rock video, the 'authenticity' of the performer is assured (if not that of the performance whose sound is still frequently dubbed)" (37). Taken together, these two observations suggest that music video works to authenticate sound recordings in much the same way—and that authentication is necessary for much the same reason—as when live performance was the main guarantor of authenticity. Now as then, the fan, possessed of the knowledge that the sound can be manipulated, needs to witness the production of the music at the appropriate site by the appropriate people in order to be assured of its authenticity. The difference, of course, is that both site and people are now simulated in televisual space rather than witnessed live, yet they count for the audience in the way only live performance counted previously.²⁷ In terms of rock ideology, and its previous rejection of television as necessarily inauthentic, this change represents a cultural shift of some magnitude.

Under the traditional schema, live performance authenticated the record, and (usually lip-synched) performance on television was deemed intrinsically inauthentic and, therefore, simply irrelevant to that process. Now, the music video occupies the place formerly held by the sound recording as the primary musical text *and* has usurped live performance's authenticating

function. The function of live performance under this new arrangement is to authenticate the *video* by showing that the same images and events that occur in the video can be reproduced onstage, thus making the video the standard for what is "real" in this performative realm. "For an increasing number of rock fans the meaning of 'live' performance, the look of music 'in reality' . . . comes from its ubiquitous simulation. This is an example of what we might call the Baudrillard effect: a concert feels real only to the extent that it matches its TV reproduction . . ." (Frith "Picking Up" 124-125). While the video authenticates the sound recording by replicating the live production of the sound, live performance authenticates the video by replicating it in real space. Live performance retains a certain value in this reconfigured schema, but its value is subordinate to that of the televisual image.

Georgia Institute of Technology

Notes

¹By "rock culture," I mean the cultural formation that includes and surrounds rock music itself, a culture whose main adherents are rock musicians, their fans, critics, promoters, etc. I have in mind something similar to what Lawrence Grossberg calls "the rock formation," a term he uses to suggest that "the identity and effect of rock always depends on more than its sonorial dimension. . . . we always locate musical practices in the context of a complex . . . set of relations with other cultural and social practices. . . ." With Grossberg, I acknowledge that there is diversity within rock culture, but justify the use of a seemingly monolithic concept by pointing out that "there is some unified sense to 'rock.' . . . the overemphasis on locality and specificity often leads us away from important generalities, as well as from the fact that such generalities are part of the reality of the local articulations . . ." ("Is Anybody Listening?" 41). It is in terms of these generalities that I am speaking here.

²Frith points out that other forms of popular music also define themselves in terms of this kind of distinction. The discourse of folk music, for instance, emphasizes its difference from "commercial pop"

(*Performing Rites* 40).

³There is some terminological confusion in the use of the expressions “popular music” and “pop music.” The distinction between rock and pop I just cited derives from American parlance; British music commentators frequently use the term pop in a way that includes rock in that category, though the same commentators may also distinguish rock from pop in other contexts. I have tried here to use “pop” to refer to rock’s ideological Other and “popular music” to refer to the broader sphere that encompasses both.

⁴See Grossberg’s similar list of oppositions in *We Gotta* 206.

⁵The distinction between rock and pop has been the subject of parliamentary debate in Great Britain. A consortium bidding to broadcast over a frequency that had been designated for music “other than pop” argued that their plan to broadcast rock music was consistent with this requirement. For an account of the ensuing debate, see Frith, *Performing Rites* 81-84.

⁶For a succinct discussion of Butler’s notion of performativity, see *Bodies that Matter* 12-16.

⁷Grossberg makes the curious observation that “rock’s appeal to its black roots further secured the primacy of sound” as opposed to visual elements (“Media Economy” 204). This seems not to take into account the rather troubling history of the discourse of authenticity in the blues and soul music, in which, at various places and times, the question of authenticity has hinged on the pigmentation of the performer’s skin. It also ignores the importance of visual elements in the performance of African-American popular music.

⁸For a useful overview of the bubblegum rock phenomenon, including the Monkees’ relationship to it, see Cafarelli, who reproduces a photograph of the Ohio Express. From the point of view of rock ideology, bubblegum is necessarily inauthentic because it was made by groups that did not exist outside the studio. Yet, one of Cafarelli’s sources goes so far as to suggest that authentic bubblegum rock can be made only by nonexistent groups!

⁹In comparing the Monkees’ music with that of other groups, Cafarelli observes that “Each [song] sounds like a stirring sample of AM-friendly pop-rock, with the Monkees (inaudible) artificial origin the sole, negligible difference between these records and contemporary records by the Raiders . . . , Turtles, Dave Clark Five, Hollies, etc., etc.” (17). Each of these groups was commercially oriented, but all had followed the conventional rock career path described below. My own list is intended to force a comparison between the Monkees and groups considered less overtly commercial in outlook, who nevertheless had hit records, even on AM radio.

¹⁰For a decade after the death of John Lennon, rumors continued to circulate that a reformed version of the Beatles would soon be on tour with his son, Julian Lennon, in his place.

¹¹Jim Curtis dismisses this disdain of the Monkees as elitism on the part of the critics (and, by extension, the rock culture generally). He points out that, authentic or not, the Monkees were extremely popular and states that "there must have been something in the grooves which made those records sell" (218). Indeed there was: the Monkees' records stand up quite well more than thirty years later. The point, however, is that popularity is not an index to authenticity. Paradoxically, even though some authentic rock groups are enormously successful financially, their authenticity hinges on their *lack* of mass market appeal or their appeal to a coterie audience, however large (e.g., the Deadheads). It is also possible that some of the Monkees' records might have sold to rock fans who would never admit to a fondness for their music. The inauthentic has its (guilty?) pleasures.

¹²Gracyk and Grossberg typify, in this respect, what Christopher Martin has identified as the "demonization of the visual" in music criticism underwritten by the ideology of rock (67).

¹³The idea that recordings represent performances that never took place is not specific to rock music. An oft-cited early example comes from the realm of classical music performance: on a recording of 1951, Wagnerian soprano Kristen Flagstad's high notes as Isolde were sung by Elizabeth Schwarzkopf to produce a perfect vocal performance (see Eisenberg 116).

¹⁴The 1966 live version of "Good Vibrations" is available on the CD box set *Good Vibrations: Thirty Years of the Beach Boys* (Capitol Records, 1993), which also includes some of the session tapes from the studio recording of the song, making it possible to hear how it was constructed. The 1969 recording is on *Live in London* (Capitol Records).

¹⁵There is no reference to this event in the discussions of Hendrix's tour with the Monkees in either Jerry Hopkins' or Harry Shapiro and Caesar Glebbeek's respective Hendrix biographies, for example (see Hopkins 122-24 and Shapiro and Glebbeek 196-201). Monkee Michael Nesmith confirmed in a personal communication that Hendrix had served only as an opening act.

¹⁶Hopkins points out the irony of the ideological view that posits Hendrix as more authentic than the Monkees by underlining the fact that the Jimi Hendrix Experience was a manufactured British group constructed around an American guitarist by Hendrix's English manager, Chas Chandler (123). The fact that Hendrix took the United States by storm only upon returning from England contributed to his mythology and made him seem that much more authentic. When he left the United States, Hendrix was a talented journeyman rhythm and blues musician.

Chandler transformed him into an exotic and iconic incarnation of Carnaby Street psychedelia. Both Hopkins and Shapiro and Glebbeek emphasize the point that Hendrix did not go down well with the Monkees' audience, and opted out of the tour after less than two weeks. His management chose to circulate a false story that Hendrix had been kicked off the tour because his performance style was too raw and sexual for the teenie boppers in the Monkees' audience. This fabrication, too, enhanced Hendrix's authenticity effect by playing on ideological distinctions between rock and pop.

¹⁷In the elided section of the last passage I quoted from Gracyk, he quotes Rolling Stone Keith Richards to support his contention that "Recording facilitates a certain indifference as to whether the music can be re-created in live performance." Therefore, it is not clear whether Gracyk intends this statement to apply to rock musicians, listeners, or both. My contention is that, whether or not it applies to rock musicians, it does not apply to fans of their music.

¹⁸The question of *who* performs the studio manipulation can be important, as well. Gracyk quotes both Eddie Kramer, who engineered many recordings by Jimi Hendrix, and Jerry Garcia, of the Grateful Dead, to the effect that the mixing of a recording constitutes "a performance at a console" (77; see also 82). In terms of rock ideology, it is preferable that this technological performance be carried out by the musical artist. If it is performed only by a producer or engineer, the taint of inauthenticity creeps in. Hence, the controversy surrounding the posthumous release of studio recordings by Hendrix, many of which featured overdubs recorded after his death. The problem with these recordings was not that they were manipulated in the studio, as were all of the albums Hendrix made when alive, but that these manipulations occurred after the death of the artist. The resulting recordings were suspected, therefore, of being inauthentic Hendrix. (Gracyk sees them as wholly unproblematic in this regard [86]). The producers of the live album *Band of Gypsies 2* (Capitol Records), which came out in 1986 after a large amount of Hendrix's remaining studio material had been issued on albums, sought to capitalize on the questions raised about those albums by emphasizing in the cover copy that the record contains "no studio tricks, just Jimi live."

¹⁹There is no one way in which authentication by live performance occurs, however. In some cases, such as that of the Beach Boys, it is necessary for the group to replicate its recordings in concert to demonstrate authenticity. In other instances (the Grateful Dead comes to mind), authenticity resides in the fact that live versions of songs are different from the recorded versions. These differences in the triangulation of live performance, recordings, and the establishment of authenticity depend in part on which rock subgenre is involved and which ideological issues

are engaged. Because the Beach Boys were suspected of being a pop group, it was crucial that they demonstrate their ability to perform their music live. Somewhat like a jazz audience, the audience for the Grateful Dead expected the group to demonstrate its authenticity by showing they could recreate their recorded sound, then go beyond it improvisationally.

²⁰Rock ideology has always been exploited for marketing purposes: see Frith, "Picking Up" and Gross (105). Without endorsing the manipulative tactics of marketeers, I will say that I find Gracyk's emphasis on the fact that rock music has always been produced in a commercial context salutary as a warning against slipping into a simplistic, romanticized opposition of "commodified" and "non-commodified" music. It is fair to say that rock, by definition, is always already commodified.

²¹My own younger students, polled in the fall of 1990, felt precisely that way.

²²For a more developed discussion of Baudrillardian simulation in the context of rock music and further consideration of Milli Vanilli, see my "Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation."

²³For an overview of rock music's relationship to television prior to MTV, see Banks 23-29. Curtis also makes some useful observations (43-44, 219).

²⁴For Grossberg, the defining change in rock culture has been a shift in the balance of the relative importance of visual and aural media (see "Media Economy"). Whereas traditional rock culture, in his view, privileged aural media as sites of authenticity and suspected the visual of inauthenticity, the new rock culture privileges the visual and no longer values authenticity. I agree with Grossberg that there has been a reconfiguration of the relationships between cultural texts in rock. But since I do not concur with Grossberg that the visual aspects of rock culture are less authentic than the aural, I do not see the same realignment he does.

²⁵It is noteworthy that one of the Monkees, Michael Nesmith, became the first producer of music videos for MTV and has been described as "the father of the [American] music video" (Nance 15).

²⁶See Goodwin's discussion of New Pop (*Dancing*, 35-36); see also Beadle.

²⁷Cf. Kaplan: "Earlier [i.e., pre-music video] promoters at least manipulated live bodies, who could resist in certain ways; but now the 'materials' that are manipulated, positioned, circulated in a certain fashion are *simulations* which begin to *replace* the 'real'" (53).

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