

Generic concept of authenticity in pop music music essay



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This thesis and its associated research had its origins in my own fascination with the generic concept of authenticity, as it exists within life generally, and specifically within popular music. The dualities of good/bad, genuine/false, honest/fraudulent, and creative/derivative have always been present within the ranks of musicians and their performances. This thesis is intended to reconcile and explain the distinctions within these dualities, and to develop a model for evaluating authenticity within popular music.

An Hypothesis on Authenticity in Popular Music

As a foundation for the research and development in this thesis, I will explain my own stance on the key issue of authenticity. There are six key tenets within this proposition:

Authenticity functions as a marker of quality

Authenticity can be evaluated.

Authenticity is not a finite concept.

An Hermeneutic approach is essential in measuring authenticity

Authenticity judgement requires a prior-researched description of genre

Authenticity may only be assigned to a single piece of musicking.

Here are some details of each one:

1. 1. 1. Authenticity functions as marker for Quality

Whilst there are some ingredients of Authenticity that are more easily measurable, there are other criteria which are more subjective, and where <https://assignbuster.com/generic-concept-of-authenticity-in-pop-music-music-essay/>

evaluation of them is an activity more determined by expert consensus, or personal taste and background. Judgements made using these criteria are largely unquantifiable, and often in the form of personal assessments. Some of these judgements may be socially and culturally constructed, and are shared between groups of people, notably in the case of fans, critics, or enthusiasts of a specific type of music, or a particular performer. Students and researchers of popular music would normally adopt a more balanced and catholic judgement, so that an equally fair evaluation would be made on a piece of 'country-rock' music, as would be made on a piece of 'punk' music. Authenticity is a description of the provenance and integrity of a recorded, or live performance, as well as a definition of musical skill, tunefulness, and of a listener's personal gratification.

The judgement, or evaluation, of some aspects of authenticity of a piece of musicking may use less scientific criteria than others, wherein the measurement is inevitably affected by the tastes of the judge or evaluator. I have drawn extensively on Christopher Small (1998: 2-3) and his eleven activities within 'musicking', in developing my own nineteen criteria for evaluating Authenticity, which operate as a hermeneutic circle, and of which the first fourteen relate to recorded songs, with an additional five criteria for evaluating live performances of songs. Here is a brief description of my nineteen criteria:

The Notation – This element is less important in popular music than in classical music, since the main method of transmission has not been through stave notation, but through recording, and performance. (Moore, A. F 2001:

34) However, where it originally exists, or where subsequent notation has
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taken place on existing works, there is still value in its inclusion as a criterion, particularly where patterns of notation may be compared within several songs, or where consistent notational motifs may be identified

Lyrics – Whilst I contend that it is Performance and Reception that are central to the true meaning of a song, the lyrics have a strong bearing on this. It is also possible to identify common patterns in lyrics (Wall, T 2003: 129) as well as everyday language in the context of performance, and collective responses and aspirations (Frith, S 1988: 121) The words of the song should usually be grammatically correct and recognisable, and the overall content should be rational.

Biography – This element should also be twinned with ‘ autobiography’ as it refers to the use and influence of personal history, upbringing, nurture and culture on singer/songwriters and their eventual compositions and performances. It is an essential element to consider as far as authenticity is concerned, and in my view has been vastly under-analysed, and has been allocated insufficient importance.

Recognised Influences – There are undoubted connections here with my Biography element (No. 3), in that childhood and developmental influences are nearly always lasting, especially where they have been received in an emotional context (e. g. happy, sad, or painful). But in addition consideration is needed on more contemporary influences, both of musical, and of other types.

Song Structure – An important element in the primary text is the actual shape of the song, in terms of its musical texture, its use of instruments and voices, its rhythmic organisation and its relationship to lyrics.

This is often a key factor in the determination of a genre. It is important that there is a pleasing shape to the song, with sufficient changes (verses and choruses), a comprehensible story line, and an appropriate length. There should also be a balance between familiarity and variety, and the song must have sufficient familiarity to provide comfortable reception, whilst, on the other hand, offering something new and challenging.

Melody – This is a pattern of pitches and rhythm that creates a tune or song, and as such, underpins the whole content of a song. It is the melody that, to a large extent, is the basis for the Emotion (No. 13) element of the song. In popular music, the melody usually comprises verses and chorus, but with variety in the phrasing and lyrics.

Meaning and Intellectuality – The meaning of a musical piece may be interpreted in an abstract or a universal manner, and Composition may be viewed as having a subtle difference in meaning from some Performances. Such differences may also affect the meaning from the position of Reception, but it is easier to see musical works anchored to specific time, place, and cultural situations. This aspect is probably the most difficult to analyse scientifically, since the central question is whether the lyrics and/or the music stimulate some intellectual curiosity, with ultimate satisfaction.

Context – This broad topic is important not just for the more obvious analysis of Performance, and Reception, but also for the historical and biographical <https://assignbuster.com/generic-concept-of-authenticity-in-pop-music-music-essay/>

context in which a song was composed. Again there will be some interconnection with aspects of Biography and especially factors such as class, culture, gender, and politics.

Instrumental – The traditional ‘rock’ line-up of a band is two or three guitars and drums, but in the case of ‘country-rock’ and its convoluted development phase, many other instruments were involved. The exploration of the use of these instruments, and the ways in which they have contributed to the Performance and Reception of music is essential. Much has been written on the appropriate use of specific instruments and their relationship to the true membership of a genre, as well as whether there are acceptable levels of musical proficiency demonstrated in the execution of the song by the instrumentalists.

Vocal – Most popular music involves one or more voices, and this element is concerned with how these voices are used, singly or harmoniously, and the ways in which communication is established between singer and listener (Moore, A. F 2001: 44/5)

It is arguable that, in many cases, it is the voice that is the final arbiter in establishing whether a piece of music is authentic or not. It is important that acceptable levels of musical proficiency are demonstrated in the execution of the song by the vocalist/s.

Production – This mainly Performance related element deals with the technical, and technological systems used to aid and enhance performance, as well as the choices made about instrumentation, vocals and, in some cases, stagecraft. There is a natural interlinking with other hermeneutical <https://assignbuster.com/generic-concept-of-authenticity-in-pop-music-music-essay/>

elements. The technical production of the recording should meet standard conventions of the genre, in regard to the mixing, the balance, and the volume as well as any additional enhancements.

Cohesion and Balance (including Sonic Balance) – This element is concerned with the extent to which the band is playing as a team with appropriate use of instruments and vocals, and to which the various instrumental and vocal elements within the performance/recording are balanced, so that a smooth and cohesive overall sound is achieved.

Connectivity and Emotivity – It is important that the listener/receiver, acknowledges a personal relationship with the song, lyrically and/or musically with the song exciting some form of emotion upon reception, and in which the listener/receiver is sufficiently stimulated and curious to have a desire to hear the song again.

The Leader – Within a band, the style of performance may be dictated or at least highly influenced by the leader who is often, although not always the singer. This inevitably affects the Reception of the music. However, the Composition of the music also needs to be considered in the light of the leader, for even if it is not he/she that is the main author, the style of the piece could be shaped by his/her approach.

Repertoire – This is what Christopher Small terms ‘ The Drama of Relationships’ (Small, C 1998: 158) Each musical performance has, or should have, a recognisable narrative, or a set-list and this is most significant in the analysis of Reception. The psychology inherent within constructing a

performance including many songs is important in the development of Audience Rapport, or even individual fan admiration.

Stagecraft – Middleton (1990: 168) recognises false music and true music, where false means corrupt, manipulated, over-complex, and mechanical, and true means natural, spontaneous, and traditional. In these senses, the interpretation of drama, and a sense of theatre in the performance and reception of popular music are always important.

It is inevitably connected to Repertoire, but is far more than this single item. Again, only in a live performance, the image presented by the performers through body movement, gestures, stance, and cohesion should augment the reception of the song.

Planning and Organisation – This ‘thoroughly contemporary affair’ as Christopher Small puts it (Small, C 1998: 30) includes the organisation of performances, the role of publicity and advertising, and the ways in which the audience is prepared for the Reception. Whilst they are not directly a composite part of a piece of music or its actual performance, the intricacies of the arrangements undoubtedly sway perceptions of a musical show or concert.

Venue – This, of course is solely a Performance/Reception element but, like Planning and Organisation, is extremely powerful, since the size, shape, location, construction, lighting and acoustics will exert major pressures on the ultimate performance.

Audience Rapport – This element is concerned with the intimacy, community, bonding and sharing of an audience and the ways in which they are able to persuade each other. It is also concerned with individual and group participation in the Performance and its effect on the perceptions of authenticity. In a live performance, there must be a general and universal approval demonstrated towards the song as demonstrated through facial and bodily expression during the performance and applause at the end.

Having described all nineteen elements used in the assessment of Authenticity, it should be stressed that whilst Authenticity is a term that provides for a description of the integrity of a piece of musicking, this integrity is not always synonymous with attractiveness, as recognised by huge swathes of the world's population. As I show in this dissertation there are plenty of examples of music that are authentic, according to measurement of many of the criteria, but which are not necessarily well received. Conversely there are many instances of well-received musicking that are not of a high level of authenticity as related to the other criteria. In other words, Authenticity is not finite.

1. 1. 2. Authenticity is not a finite concept.

Authenticity has so many different components (I have identified at least nineteen) as well as many mediators, so that relative judgements on each of the items would almost certainly mean that a final decision as to whether the song was authentic, could never result in a simple ' yes' or ' no', but would be a relative assessment.

The more appropriate question that should be posed by the judge, or evaluator, would be: 'to what extent has this song/performance been deemed to be authentic?'

A piece of musicking may, for example, have some authentic attributes, such as a truly original instrumental performance, and the vocal qualities may be genuine, whereas its lyrical content may be mundane, and derivative, thus rendering the song only 'partially authentic'.

This particular principle relegates the 'rockism' argument, described in other parts of this thesis, to a peripheral position, since it accommodates varying degrees of authenticity, rather than insisting on one broad form of music being superior to another, simply based on its provenance. 'Rockists' are people who consider that there were, and occasionally still are, golden periods of 'Rock', illuminated by artists and performances which contain an honesty, authenticity, and value of which the mainstream of performers in 'pop' music are both incapable and unconcerned.

The differences that show themselves when evaluating Authenticity, particularly in the contrasts between the more objective criteria and those that embody the expression of values generated and constructed by the critical and fan community, mean that an evaluation of authenticity cannot remain in perpetuity, and that it has a clear temporal characteristic, wherein evaluation may change over time.

Therefore, despite the fact that judgements on the Authenticity of pieces of musicking may be made, they are essentially of a relative nature.

1. 1. 3. Authenticity can be evaluated

There are many different hypotheses on the topic of musical authenticity, many of which have been reviewed and assessed within this thesis, all of which, without exception, explain the concept in notional terms, whilst avoiding any attempt to develop, or impose, a quantitative measurement of judgement.

The decision on the authenticity of a piece of musicking, has been derived from a qualitative evaluation, left to the complex devices supposedly inherent within the intellectual abilities of a few senior musicologists and experts, or socially and culturally constructed values. I propose that, with the application of a list of authenticity criteria, built into a hermeneutic framework, there are a number of activities that can move the efficacy of the judgement towards a more accurate qualitative assessment, albeit still with strong elements of discrimination within it.

1. 1. 4. A hermeneutic approach is essential in evaluating authenticity

Since each evaluation criterion has influences upon, and from, each of the other criterion, the idea of a 'circle' is used so that one's understanding of a piece of musicking, as a whole, is established by reference to the individual criteria and one's understanding of each individual criterion by reference to the whole.

Neither the whole piece nor any individual criterion can be understood without reference to one another, and hence, it is a circular process. Strictly speaking, hermeneutics was originally conceived as means of cultivating the

ability to understand things from someone else's point of view, and to set aside one's own predilections and tastes. So the whole evaluation exercise must be considered in full awareness of the evaluation conclusions which may have been reached by the relevant community practice, before and during the judgement process. Using the tools and procedures that I have developed to make an ultimate judgement on both authenticity, ensures that the decision will be as informed, researched, and analytical as is possible.

1. 1. 5. Authenticity judgement requires a researched description of genre

Whilst I have described in some detail the general nature of a range of criteria that I have allocated to Authenticity [including Quality], it is important that the Authenticity criteria are enhanced and made more explicit. This should be done through a close examination, and subsequent description, of the genre that one is analysing (in this thesis, my exemplar is 'country-rock' music). There have been major academic debates on the nature of genre, and in particular whether genre is a stable item rather than a temporal one. My position is based on the assumption that genre may be fixed and stationary, if one is, firstly, prepared to accept the existence of a continuum of a multitude of popular music styles, within which many different genres and sub-genres reside.

Secondly, and perhaps paradoxically, it is important to acknowledge that the detailed description of any single genre, or sub-genre, is not universally acknowledged and is, therefore never canonically explicit. The nature of both of these conditions will be influenced by the beliefs and convictions of individual researchers. This means that genre definitions will inevitably vary,

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albeit within boundaries. Nevertheless, it is essential to generate a broad genre template through which authenticity may be evaluated.

It is important to note that authenticity may be a validity descriptor of a piece of 'musicking,' both in general terms, in the sense that the song has been composed, performed, and received in an authentic manner, but also in genre specific terms; so that a song may be classed as being authentic 'blues' or authentic 'country-rock'.

The significance of this lies in the need to define genre-parameters when attempting to evaluate authenticity within a genre; hence the statement: Authenticity Judgement Requires A Researched Description Of Genre.

1. 1. 6. Authenticity may only be assigned to a single piece of musicking

Within Popular Music, I propose that the evaluation of authenticity may only be made as far as a recorded or performed song is concerned. Authenticity comprises a number of attributes of composition, performance and reception, but is largely concerned with sound, rather than the characteristics of a human being. Therefore, authenticity cannot be assigned to an artist, other than in a general sense, through a judgement of his/her individual performance of a song. It may be seductive to contemplate the authenticity of an artist, as has been done frequently over the history of popular music, and as argued forcibly by the Rockists. Indeed, many rock artists have been accorded that epithet, including Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Bono, Leonard Cohen, and Lou Reed. However, human authenticity is a complex and hugely debatable concept.

For example, it is arguable that even these notable performers could only be described as authentic, if they were to have totally eschewed commercial gain, desire for glory, or other forms of psychological reward during their long and successful lives. This has patently not been the case. Of course, it is arguable that human authenticity could be assessed on the basis that it is not a finite concept (as I have professed is the case for musicking).

However, the study of authenticity of individual human beings, would be a multi-faceted, and almost impossible task, since there are so many variables and criteria, which would need to be taken into account, such that even a relative evaluation would involve an extremely complex decision-making process. It is most certainly not within the remits of my research within this thesis. It is also important to stress that the epithet of authenticity cannot be assigned to a body of work, rather than a single song or piece of music, but is only related to individual performances/recordings of songs.

It would be possible, however, to make assessments of a number of individual songs performed by one artist or even an assembled group of artists, wherein it might then be possible to offer an overall measurement of the degree of authenticity of that particular set of songs – but it would be an average, or mean, of the total assessment.

On the same basis, it would be technically possible, albeit extremely arduous and time-consuming, to carry out such an exercise on the entire output of a particular artist. It should be stressed that even so, the eventual conclusion would still be an evaluation of the performance of the music, rather than the person.

At this point I should also restate that my position holds that the evaluation of Authenticity of a live performance of a song may be made, even though this will inevitably differ from the recorded version of the same song. All of the criteria used in the evaluation of a recorded song will apply to a live performance of a song, but there will also be a few additional elements that should be applied. These are listed under an earlier principle (Authenticity functions as a marker for Quality)