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Going through the motions: popular music performance in journalism and in academic discourse

TIM QUIRK AND JASON TOYNBEE

Abstract

Popular music performance raises important questions about music-making as process. These questions are addressed through dealing with a further issue: the difference between music journalism and academic discourse on music. A dialogic structure is adopted. First, in a short paper, Tim Quirk examines film of The Who playing at the Isle of Wight in 1970. He shows how Pete Townshend's performance moves through a cycle, from incompetence to the extraordinary: paradoxically, formulaic performance prompts sincerity (and so an extraordinary performance) on the part of Townshend. Jason Toynbee responds by arguing that Quirk's writing is able to open up, as journalism, an approach to performance not available to academics. What is at stake is the foregrounding of subjectivity in the writer (Quirk) and, through this, the inter-subjectivity of performer and audience. Quirk's own response follows, and there is then a second round of responses which develops these issues.

Introduction

Jason Toynbee

I missed Tim Quirk (music writer and former singer for the punk-pop group Too Much Joy) giving his paper on Pete Townshend, performance and pop at the 2004 Experience Music Project conference.[1] Reading a transcript afterwards I realised what I'd missed, namely a passionately engaged, often hilarious, yet always rigorous analysis which opened up questions of performance in ways I hadn't seen before. One aspect of this was Quirk's method and style. I'd describe these as 'journalistic' if it wasn't for the fact this tends to be a pejorative term in academe. Here it often implies a merely descriptive approach; flashy; dealing with surface rather than depth. That certainly didn't apply to the paper in question.

Still, as an academic I had to acknowledge that Quirk's piece didn't fit academic norms. But in what sense and to what effect did it diverge? I suggested to Eric Weisbard (issue editor and EMP curator) and the editorial group that I engage Quirk in a dialogue about this. He jumped at the chance. It turned out he'd been thinking about the same issue, but from the standpoint of the music journalist, a place where academic writing can appear pompous and verbose, concerned with talking around subjects rather than focusing on them.

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What follows, then, is an attempt at a dialogue between the two positions. 'Going Through the Motions', Quirk's paper comes first. Its topic of music, performance and value is at the centre of the subsequent exchange between Quirk and myself. In the course of this dialogue each writer defends his 'own' approach while also trying to understand the possibilities and limits inscribed in the discourse of the other.

Going Through the Motions: why Pete Townshend's windmill works even when he doesn't mean it

Tim Quirk

We're going to start with some film – The Who playing 'Young Man Blues' at the Isle of Wight in 1970. I've always loved The Who, but I never really cared for their version of this song until I first watched a DVD of them playing it live at the Isle of Wight in 1970 (Lerner 1996), when it just nailed me to my seat. I actually got goose bumps – all the hairs on both my arms stood straight up. I watched it again the next morning when I wasn't so stoned to make sure I'd seen what I thought I had, and it still blew me away.

The song lasts for about five and a half minutes, and during that time you witness a wild transformation: the band starts out playing the song, but by the end it's the other way around – the music takes over, and it's the song that's playing the band. As a fan and a critic, of course, I live for moments like that. More importantly, though, as a guy who spent a good ten years on the road in a band that very much wanted to be The Who (actually, The Clash, but it's really the same thing), I know just how easy those moments are to fake, and how that can make chasing after genuine onstage epiphanies not just a point of honour, but a physical craving that gets harder and harder to satisfy the more often you do it.

That's the nifty thing about this bit of film: you don't just get to see the band reaching for an elusive moment and capturing it. You also get to see them lose it after Pete Townshend plays a bum note, and then you get to watch Townshend vamp around desperately trying to call it back. And when he finally succeeds, the whole thing rockets to another level, and you get to witness both the man and the song disappear entirely for a few priceless moments.

Before we talk about the song, though, Pete's got something apropos to say about his job:

> When I'm on the stage, let me try and explain: when I'm on the stage, I'm not in control of myself at all. I don't even know who I am, you know. I'm not this rational person that can sit here now and talk to you . . . I'm just not there, really. It's not like being possessed, it's just I do my job, and I know that I have to get into a certain state of mind to do it.[2]

When Pete says, 'I do my job', he's not being ironic in the slightest. He takes his work very seriously, and on stage his job is to lose control. But he's got a dilemma: all the outward signs of him losing control – the leaps, the windmills, the guitar smashing – only work for a little while. It's like that old Bugs Bunny cartoon where he and Daffy Duck keep trying to outdo each other onstage. No matter what Daffy does, Bugs always one ups him, until finally Daffy drinks some gasoline, then swallows a match and explodes. The crowd goes wild and Bugs urges Daffy to take an encore. But, as his ghost ascends to heaven, Daffy sighs and says, 'That's the problem with that bit: I can only do it once'.

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Townshend's windmill must have happened for the first time once, presumably because he couldn't control himself. But the motion quickly became a move: a signature he was expected to repeat nightly, which then became part of rock and roll's trick bag – a thing you do to demonstrate the kind of music you're playing, rather than something that happens because the music's playing you.

The windmill is now such an iconic rock gesture that not only does it have a name, but the very footage that so impressed me is featured in a montage sequence in *School of Rock*, when Jack Black's teaching his students how to look and move onstage. If you're like me, though, you notice two different kinds of Pete Townshend windmills when you watch that clip. They look exactly the same, but they *feel* different. The first is the 'I'm-doing-this-cuz-all-you-fuckers-expect-me-to' windmill. And the second is the 'I'm-doing-this-because-I-can't-help-myself' windmill. If my presentation has a thesis, it's that you can't have one kind of windmill without the other.

At the first Pop Conference,[3] the word 'authenticity' cropped up during so many panels that it actually started getting booed by the end of the weekend, so I don't want anyone to worry that I'm going to waste your time insisting that one type of windmill is authentic, and one is a sham. As a performer, though, it has certainly been my experience that sometimes you don't think about what you're doing on stage at all – shit just happens, and you watch it unfold at the exact same moment the audience does, so that you will suddenly find yourself in mid air, for example, with no real idea how you got there – whereas other times you actually find yourself thinking, 'Oh, I should make my way over to the drum riser, cuz we're about to modulate and it will look pretty cool if I time my leap right'.

So to me it's not a black and white, either-it's-real-or-it's-faked choice. Rather, there's a spectrum: you have spontaneous action on one end and planned moves on the other. At one extreme the crowd watches the band lose itself in the music, and at the other the band consciously tries to make the crowd lose control.

Both ends of that spectrum can be equally enjoyable. I doubt Too Much Joy were the only band that sometimes travelled with two sets of gear: the good, expensive kind that we used most of the time, and the shitty instruments that our roadies passed us at the end of select performances when it felt like we needed to smash shit up. When the show was over, they'd collect what pieces they could, then try to put them back together so they could stay in tune for at least the length of one more song. We didn't use them every night, but we did break them more often than we could actually have afforded in real life. But every once in a while one of us would get angry or happy or just drunk enough to smash one of our regular instruments, and I still have no idea if the audience ever noticed any difference. The rest of the band was always suitably shocked, however.

Just cuz a band's surprising itself doesn't mean it's any fun to watch, though, as Pete demonstrates about three minutes into the song by playing what's frankly kind of a lame lead, which sputters to such a sad halt, ending what had been a genuine frenzy.

It's almost as though Pete suddenly remembers who and where he is, and the magic disappears. But how's he get it back? The exact same way he lost it: he remembers who and where he is! He's fucking Pete Townshend! On stage with the fucking Who! So he starts acting like it, leaping and windmilling like he's supposed to, and before too long he isn't acting anymore.

I find the part where Pete stops playing and just shakes his guitar over and over,[4] letting it ring, pretty damn profound, because it feels like he's finally gotten exactly where he wanted to be and it has nothing to do with looking cool or even playing

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well. It's about nothing more than a moment of glorious noise, and surrendering completely to its power.

Calling up those moments is tremendously difficult, and making them last for any serious length of time nearly impossible. So when you want to summon one, you do what superstitious humans have always done: namely, whatever the hell you were doing the first time it happened.

This goes on all the time when you're a touring rock band: you do something accidentally one night – some new banter, or a way you haven't strummed on that song before, or someone else in the band jumping through the air at the same time you fall to your knees, so he just misses your head – and both you and the crowd are surprised and excited. Because it's your job to please the crowd, you try it again the next night, only this time you're practised, so the crowd responds not just to the moment you summon, but also to your obvious command of that moment. If it works twice, it becomes a regular part of the act, and that very phrase hints at the transformation the moment is undergoing.

The thing is, those little bits are usually more powerful the third, fourth and fifth time they happen than the first, when it was just a happy accident. You can probably say this about most anything musical, I think: in the studio, for instance, the same logic applies. While there are some musicians who insist in interviews that they prefer first takes, I'm pretty sure those folks are liars, or else they just have attention deficit disorder. For my band, third takes were often the ones that achieved the best balance between knowing the thing well enough to nail every part just right, and being just unsure enough whether everyone was going to avoid fucking up that our surprise and glee when things went right gave the song a lift that would gradually disappear from subsequent run-throughs.

Live, the algebra for all this gets a lot more complicated. On the one hand, you only get one take on stage. But on the other, chances are you've played these songs dozens or hundreds of times already, so every additional performance threatens to strip another little bit of the mystery away. If you're lucky, the push and pull between those opposing phenomena helps you remain poised in the sweet spot between them, and I think you can hear how weariness battles with expectation in the mind of a touring musician when Pete introduces *Tommy* eight songs later in that Isle of Wight performance.

> We'd like to play for you tonight, something which we played over the other side of the island, when we were here last year, wearing the same clothes, carrying the same guitars. With the same personnel and the same road manager, and all the groups using our P.A., same as last year. Driving over in the same cars. It's all the same this year as it was last year. And, uh, we're going to play the same thing that we played last year. Something which all of you have probably come specially to hear . . . [5]

When you just read that quote, it's easy to assume Pete was bitter or bored, but he doesn't actually sound all that morose as he counts off all the things that haven't changed in the year since they last played these very songs in these very clothes at this very venue – he simply sounds bemused.

I'm guessing that Pete was still having fun, but was suspicious of those moments when it felt like he was just putting on a show, even if the show he was putting on was a damn good one.

Performers like pleasing audiences, and audiences are going to be happy more consistently when they're being served up something that's worked before, but for a lot of musicians – and Pete Townshend was pretty obviously one of these by the

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early-1970s – there's a law of diminishing returns. To the extent that you're just putting on a show you're not only precluding the possibility of discovering anything new, but also smothering the flame that made the old stuff powerful in the first place. As the years pass, the moments that surprise you come less and less often, but if the crowd's clapping as loudly as ever it can start to feel like you're a priest for some cargo cult: your followers love the bamboo air towers and wooden headphones so much that they've forgotten what those things are supposed to call down from the sky. They're confusing the gestures with the goal, but you know you're failing, and if you can't make an army plane appear soon, no one – including you – will ever believe they really existed, once.

I attended Tom Kipp's 'Taxonomy of Sludge' panel at a previous Pop Conference,[6] and I thought it was brilliant how he and Tim Midgett catalogued the way various musical bits get re-used so often that all traces of their original inspiration are eventually lost (my favourite was probably 'Reggae Upstroke as Pathetic Roots Move'). Anyway, we were all laughing so hard that one member of the audience objected – he thought we were ridiculing music that lots of fans took very seriously. Needless to say, that guy missed the point completely. We weren't laughing at the music – we were laughing at the chasm between what the music wanted to mean and what it was doomed to mean to anyone who'd heard it too many times before.

But as I think you can see when Pete starts windmilling so fast that he seems seconds away from taking off like a helicopter,[7] the music can always surprise you, and the times that it does are actually sweeter if you've already convinced yourself it's all bullshit. Anyone reading this who's said 'I love you' to someone and really, really meant it should know exactly what I'm talking about.

That's why I think it's wonderful rather than distressing to realise the thing that first calls the mojo back after Pete loses it is nothing more profound than a simple stage trick:[8] the band brings it down so Roger can shout, 'They stepped back!', then Pete and Keith hammer the beat on the word 'Back!' for a brief frisson of excitement before bringing it back down again, until Roger repeats the line and they slam the word 'Back!' again.

Unfortunately, the band misses the beat – or, more precisely, fails to hit it all together – the second time around, which only serves to remind you that this is real, the band is playing live, and things can go wrong. So it's that much more powerful when the phrase comes round again, and they don't just nail it, but they do it five times in suddenly rapid succession. All of a sudden, they're pros, and their ability to hit their cues makes the crowd roar, and gives Pete the power to take them all someplace that sounds less rehearsed but no less amazing.[9]

The word I keep coming back to is surprise. There are dozens of ways to be surprised, and several of them happen at once as Roger shouts, 'Back! Back! Back! Back! Back!' Anyone seeing The Who play this song for the first time is surprised when the lyric and the music don't do what they were doing a couple seconds ago. The band is doubly surprised: first because they pulled the trick off when everything else suddenly seemed to be going wrong, and second because the trick works on them, too. The crowd screams, which is surprising even when you're used to it if you haven't yet convinced yourself you deserve it, but only feels good when you're already clapping for yourself in your head, which you should be if you all just hit your cues after four minutes of false starts. If everything happens the exact same way tomorrow, it might not feel quite as satisfying, but that's OK, because these things have to not work the way they used to every once in a while in order for them to keep surprising you.

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Since I keep extolling ineffable moments of transcendence, I should probably explain that I'm a semi-militant atheist, which means that while I understand making my way in this country requires me to nod politely and pretend I respect other peoples' beliefs, the truth is I find it difficult to take anything someone says seriously after they've told me they believe in God. Nonetheless, when I wind up in places of worship, I find myself wishing I could appreciate the rituals as more than empty gestures. Interpreting them intellectually feels puny and wrong, which is maybe a stupid thing to say after spending however many minutes trying to dissect the meaning of a guitar strum. But that's the point I want to be sure I've made before I shut up: the more music you play, the more music you hear, the harder it becomes for the music to affect you, and the better it feels whenever it does anyway. And when the music can't pull that off on its own, talented performers can force it to do so. Not because they have faith in something bigger (although they might), and not because they think they're all that matters (although this is even more likely) – just because they know how to fill the space until the music pushes them out of the way again.

Response 1

Jason Toynbee

Let me start by saying that I really like your paper, Tim. But the things I like about it are chiefly things which distinguish it, as a form of journalism, from academic writing about popular music. What I want to do here, then, is examine these differences with a view to weighing up the particular contributions of each approach.

Firstly, like most pop journalists you treat the subjective experience of music using a subjective approach. In other words, you adopt a first person voice, describe your own reactions and call on your own experience in a direct and (apparently) transparent way. Of course, you appeal to some notion of objectivity too, by inviting the reader to recognise the phenomena you describe as belonging to a world of music, and therefore beyond merely her or his own individual experience. Still, from an academic standpoint it's the subjective-ness which stands out. For, quite simply, the rule in the scholarly trade is: 'be objective, don't show too many signs that it is ''I'' thinking this'. There are good reasons for such an approach. To state the obvious, academics in both humanities and social sciences have inherited the Enlightened commitment to find out the truth about everything (including popular music) on the basis that to do so requires a rational method and the systematic gathering of evidence. Objectivity springs from that tradition (see Weber 1904 for a classic discussion of objectivity in the social sciences). But my point is that there are real advantages with avowed subjectivity in the case of rock: it can bring you close to the position of the listener and performer; it even makes you something like a 'participant observer', to use a term from anthropology. By the same token what it doesn't do is reflect on the nature and status of subjectivity itself. It just assumes that the subject's eye view is valid. Interestingly, some more 'postmodern' academics who criticise what they take to be a naïve or essentialist demarcation between the subjective and objective now adopt a first-person position when regarding popular culture. Rarely do they do it as well as you, I'd say.

Secondly, you deal with popular music performance, a topic which academics in popular music studies don't often discuss. David Pattie (1999) does, but his article

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treats musicians' and journalists' discourse about performance more than performance itself. Theodore Gracyk (1996) touches on the topic too, but mainly so as to argue for the primacy of the recording *over* performance in rock. Someone else who considers performance in relation to mediation (actually rock music is only one among several examples he offers) is Phil Auslander (1997). Auslander takes a different position from Gracyk in that he sees mediation as being shot through with liveness. One example might be the magic moment of watching a DVD of The Who on stage. Performance and mediation are thoroughly mixed up here.

For all their differences, what's interesting is that these academics invariably start from a meta-critical position of questioning how performance has previously been conceived. There's nothing wrong with that. The critique of what has been said before, or engagement in scholarly debate, is one of the great things about the academic approach. But you explicitly reject that approach. I'm thinking particularly about the place where you mention the authenticity debate, only to say that you won't be sidetracked by it. That's key, I think, because it enables you to focus on the actual performance of the band (or at least a film of that performance). Most academic work on performance doesn't do this.

Thirdly, you bring your experience as a musician to bear on the question of The Who's performance at the Isle of Wight. This is where the piece gets really interesting I think, because there's so little of this kind of writing either in academia *or* journalism. Actually, 'bring your experience' isn't quite the right way of putting it. What you do is write from the position of a musician reflecting on the problem of performance. Now, in academia there might be a tendency to see this approach as too production centred. But what I find fascinating is that you end up discussing audiences as much as performers, the total event as much as the way the musicians see it. And that's because you always approach performance in terms of communicative process, as a transaction which connects both parties. That doesn't mean the parties are equal though. As you point out, even if 'you [the musician] watch it unfold at the exact same moment the audience does' (p. 401), nonetheless 'the crowd responds not just to the moment you summon, but also to your obvious command of that moment' (p. 402).

This gets right to the heart of the complex relationship between performer and audience. On the one hand, performers are just like the audience in that they can be astonished by the sublimity of their performance too. It is something beyond both parties. On the other hand, the audience succumbs before the veritable power of the performer, while in seeing such power enacted the performer is persuaded that s/he can exert it again using the same techniques.

You make another point, connected to this one. In doing the same thing because it has worked before, musicians may actually '[preclude] the possibility of discovering anything new', as well as 'smothering the flame that made the old stuff powerful in the first place' (p. 403). In other words, performers have to negotiate an extremely tricky path, because competence in the tried and tested (A) tends to frustrate innovation (B) and the sublime (C), even while it is a precondition of both these desiderata.

You also raise the issue of *in*competence. What happens in cases where (A) breaks down, and thus (B) or (C) collapses too? You have a great example: Pete Townshend's 'lame lead'. After the initial chorus of 'Young Man Blues' sung by Roger Daltrey, Townshend plays a solo which seems to be going nowhere. He looks uncomfortable. So he reverts to well tried performance tropes, 'leaping and windmilling like he's supposed to' (p. 401). In this way, he manages to lever himself back up into a

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commanding position. By the end of the number he's shaking his guitar, turning a sustained power chord through reverberating changes for a minute or more of rock rapture.

What's so illuminating about your analysis of this cycle is that you show not only how it is possible to move from competence to incompetence and back, but also between self-conscious and unselfconscious performance, and even banal and sublime performance. What's more, in the case of any one of these binaries, the effect on the other two of moving between poles is only predictable to a limited extent. Rock performance is thus both complex and unstable.

I've probably spent long enough rehearsing your argument here. But I want to say one more thing before moving on. It strikes me that you're pretty close to Derrida (1991) and his meditation on the 'impure' nature of the performative in writing. Perversely enough, Derrida takes writing to be the primary form of communication, and he offers the signature as a case in point. One signs a letter in order to affirm one's presence in the context of the physical absence of the addressee. Crucially, however, the iterability of this signature undermines the presence-affirming aspect of the 'trace' on the paper. It seems to me your discussion of Pete Townshend's windmill as 'signature' has a strong Derridean resonance. The windmill is born through possession; it declares the complete presence of Townshend. However, as a signature, that is to say a repetitive device, the move signifies the absence of that singular moment of possession *through the very act of affirmation*. In a sense that's the central theme of your paper – it's a case study in the uncertainty of rock performance.

The last observation I want to make has to do with your writing. Your style combines precise exposition with rich, figurative use of language. And you move between the formal and the vernacular to excellent effect. Partly, this is a matter of what the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1982) calls 'interillumination'. One kind of discourse throws into relief the other, so that we can see what's being said more clearly than if a single register had been used. Partly, I think, the quality lies at the level of the writing itself. We eagerly follow the flow of words in the expectation that we are about to come upon something surprising, a new turn of phrase or type of speech. An example. Towards the end you say, 'I keep extolling ineffable moments of transcendence'. Such moments, presumably, would include the one you mention a few lines earlier where Pete Townshend remembers, 'He's fucking Pete Townshend! On stage with the fucking Who!' The contrast in language types and the pressing self-parody of 'I *keep* extolling' (how many times can one extol ineffable moments?) make us chuckle, yet they have a powerful expositive function too. These tropes make points.

Some academic analysts of popular culture aspire to this sort of accomplished range across different registers. The trouble is that even if they have the skill to do it, they aren't allowed. Of course there are exceptions. The writing of an Andrew Ross or Simon Frith often sparkles. This surely has something to do with the fact that they operate as academics *and* as journalists. The double life gives them both the competence and the licence to write engagingly. Most academic writers, however, don't really aim for *brio*. To a certain extent this can be understood as a strategy of distinction. The use of monological, scholarly rhetoric, with its sometimes arcane lexis and distended syntax, constitutes an attempt to mark out academic work from (more authoritative than?) other kinds of writing. Still, I'd argue in the final analysis there's a worthy factor at stake here, namely that desire for objectivity discussed earlier. Academic writing should not speak of the writer, but rather of the things written about.

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I started this commentary by saying that I wanted to explore differences between journalistic and academic approaches to popular music using your paper as a case study. Now I am beginning to wonder about the premises which underlie this aim. As an academic writing in an academic journal, there's a sense in which I am engaging in a rather obnoxious version of meta-criticism. In other words, by discussing the criticism of someone I name 'journalist' I am simply attempting to get on to higher ground. That doesn't sound ethical; actually it smacks of downright condescension.

Still, that's the name of the academic game. We *will* speak of everything and do so from the highest place we can reach – all in the legitimate interest of finding out the truth. Of course to the extent that I've been doing that here, it has been in order to show how journalism may be better at some things than academic work, for instance getting to grips with performance in rock.

All this reflexivity is threatening to run riot, so I ought to stop. Actually, it's already gone too far for any analytical 'weighing up' of the approaches of journalism and academia to understanding popular music – which is what I promised at the start. Here's a really bland and pious conclusion instead. Each is good in its own special way.

What do you think?

Response 1

Tim Quirk

You begin and end with the notion of objectivity, and while I obviously agree that there are distinct advantages to taking an avowedly subjective approach to rock, I want to question your presupposition that academic writing is more objective than first-person narration specifically and pop journalism in general. Certainly, the informal nature of my own piece might make a curious contrast with whatever essays surround it in the journal, but I'm going to argue that a distanced, scholarly tone can too easily masquerade prejudices and value judgements that can't help but be paraded naked for readers to see and evaluate for themselves when one writes in the first person. I don't think it's accurate to say subjectivity 'just assumes that the subject's eye view is valid'; rather, it begins with the fact that one person thinks these things, and while there may be an implicit hope that those thoughts correspond with some universal truth, there's no insistence that they must.

I don't mean to get all relativistic here – I enjoy questing after The Truth as much as any academic; I just think there are plenty of fun and interesting ways to do so, and I don't believe allowing a level of subjectivity into your writing precludes you from approaching the object of your analysis systematically. On the contrary, I think it's often necessary in order to distinguish personal truths from universal ones. My layman's reading of the Weber (1904) paper you cite doesn't find any suggestion that social science must limit itself to a rational analysis of empirical facts. He's simply saying writers have a responsibility to distinguish between the values that drive their work and the data that work uncovers: 'it should be constantly made clear to the readers (and – again we say it – above all to one's self!) exactly at which point the scientific investigator becomes silent and the evaluating and acting person begins to

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speak', he writes (and you've got to love that exclamation mark), then explicitly states that there's no dictum 'against the clear-cut introduction of one's own ideals into the discussion'. In that regard, I find Weber's exhortations to be more of a warning to academics that they shouldn't hide behind objectivity than a rule book insisting they must remove any hint of subjectivity.

Another one of the papers you cite, David Pattie's (1999) '4 Real: authenticity, performance and rock music', provides a good example of the trap Weber warns against. Pattie begins with a chilling episode reported in the *NME*: Ritchey James from the Manic Street Preachers trying to prove his authenticity by carving the phrase '4 Real' in his arm. I find Pattie's examination of this moment well written, engaging and thought provoking, and his ultimate conclusion – that the contradiction between the simultaneously staged and spontaneous elements of the act lies at the heart of almost all rock performances – convincing (and it corresponds in many intriguing ways with my own paper). However, Pattie seems so caught up in the elegance of his argument that he becomes incapable of distinguishing between what the number 4 *might* mean and what he *needs* it to mean for his argument to work.

At first, Pattie's careful to qualify his hunch that the number is a symbol of heartfelt artifice: 'the numeral seems both less and more than it represents', he writes, suggesting it could be a Prince reference, and so 'might be thought of as too self-aware, as a too-knowing sign'. But by the end of the paper, all these seem's and might-be's are gone: 'the ''4'' is far too obviously a constructed sign', he declares categorically, conveniently recording this as a fact rather than a judgement just in time to bolster his concluding paragraph.

Nowhere in the paper does Pattie acknowledge a seemingly more obvious possibility: that James used the number 4 instead of the letters F-O-R because *carving things into your flesh with a razor blade is goddamn painful and not something to be prolonged unduly*. Does that make Pattie's musings about the numeral's significance less interesting? Hell no – either way, it's an amazing metaphor. So what's gained by trying to lend those musings the weight of scientific truth?

That's not a rhetorical question, by the way, and I ask because it touches on another of the points you raise, about how academics 'invariably' begin with an overview of previous thinking on whatever topic they intend to address. While I can see the value in doing so, I'm curious if it's always strictly necessary, and to what extent the habit of scholarly debate you call 'one of the great things about the academic approach' might increase the temptation to cast personal ideals as objective truths – that is, if one has to begin every paper by laying out how others have conceived a particular issue, doesn't it sort of follow that one's job is to explain why those folks were wrong, or incomplete? That strikes me as an easy way to get distracted from more central issues.

Despite appearances, I'm not trying to set academic writing up in opposition to pop journalism here. I'm more interested in talking about good writing and bad writing (or maybe I should say effective writing and ineffective writing), and I think plenty of pop journalists are guilty of a reverse mistake: reading up on what other reviewers have said before committing their own thoughts to paper to make sure they've got the 'right' opinion about a particular artist or album.

Again, the problem isn't that there are no objective truths when analysing something as inscrutable as music – the problem is that overvaluing either approach makes it easier to conflate inarguable facts with subjective opinions, and therefore more difficult to see where one stops and the other begins.

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I haven't read the Gracyk (1996) book yet, but your half-sentence summary of one of his arguments (that recordings have 'primacy' over performance in rock) leaves me cold, partly because that notion sounds more like a value judgement than a fact, and a fairly pointless one at that. To me, there's the record, there's the show, and sometimes there's the record of the show. Different people like different ones more. Figuring out why might be fun, but arguing that one always trumps the others feels like a waste of time. If Gracyk wants to tell me why *he* prefers records to shows, I'm happy to listen, but if he's gonna insist that records just *are* more significant than shows, well, I'm kinda busy right now, sorry.

Ditto for Auslander's (1997) 'Ontology vs. History: making distinctions between the live and the mediatised'. Maybe the subjective approach tempts writers to crawl up their own asses, but I don't find that half as disturbing as watching Auslander crawl up the asses of others in his efforts to explain that live performance needn't be viewed in opposition to recorded performance.

I guess I should applaud his intent, insofar as he's trying to get folks to value both forms equally, but to me his methods read like a parody of the scholarly approach. I wouldn't be this mean if his paper hadn't been so full of lively metaphors that he kept suffocating under frilly pillows of jargon in what I can only assume was an effort to make them more presentable to stuffy guests he was hoping to impress. The bit where he quotes Sean Cubitt, then Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, then Stanley Cavell, then Heath and Skirrow again, all on his way to declaring 'the televisual image is not only a reproduction or repetition of a performance, but a performance in itself', *could* have been powerful. But here's what I wrote in the margin as I read: 'Great metaphor. Dopey objective truth'.

I think Auslander's trapped by the academic method. He believes scholars overvalue 'liveness', and wants to make a case that recorded performance should be weighted equally. But, because of some academic law against allowing subjectivity into one's arguments, he's not permitted to explain why *he* values recorded performance. His only options are (i) to show that scholars who give live performance 'primacy' are doing so based on their own unspoken values (which I guess is supposed to automatically invalidate their arguments) and (ii) to argue that there's no objective difference between 'live' and 'recorded' (which would mean anyone who values live performance *has* to value recorded performance equally). So he bends himself into all kinds of uncomfortable shapes trying to prove apples are very orange-like and winds up looking ridiculous, when he could be standing straight and saying, 'I like recordings, because . . .'.

I should be honest myself, though, and confess that what really irked me about the paper was this one line: 'Half jokingly, I might cite Pavis's observation that ''theatre repeated too often deteriorates'' as evidence that the theatrical object degenerates in a manner akin to a recorded object!'

Har har. I hate his exclamation mark almost as much as I love Weber's, because the thing he tosses off as a humorous aside not meant for serious contemplation is essentially the entire thesis of my own piece. It pains me to see him trip over a thought I find fascinating, only to ignore it in favour of more blathering about contingency and ontology and imbrication, words that pretend to be precise but strike me as just complicated ways of saying, 'It's all good'.

Here's something I believe pretty strongly but can't necessarily prove: there are a lot of things worth knowing about that can only be expressed as metaphor, and any attempts to capture them more objectively are doomed to failure. This is particularly

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true when it comes to music, which I've always considered the best way we have of expressing the ineffable. In a way, that's what my paper's all about, and I think that might be why, even though I admire Pattie's writing, I just fundamentally disagree with the way he frames his argument, which is (to me) admirably sceptical of the notion of 'authenticity' while still mired in a pointless attempt to pinpoint when and why certain artists can be said to possess it.

Blah. Here's what I think, and what I hope my paper presented in as convincing a manner as possible: music is the path, not the destination. What I love most about music – and rock music is especially good at this – is its ability to take you someplace beyond words that just feels right. It's perfectly valid to analyse when and how and why those feelings come about, but I can't imagine any way to do so honestly without allowing a level of subjectivity into the conversation. I only know rock can take you someplace that feels authentic because I've been there. I'm guessing a precondition of getting there is a belief that the musician sincerely wants to take you, but that doesn't require the musician, or the music, or the performance itself, to somehow embody 'authenticity'.

Like I said, I'm relying on metaphor and subjective experience to sort of mark off the boundaries of what I'm talking about, so to some extent this approach is only going to be useful to others who've had similar experiences – but since others *have* had similar experiences, it follows that there's a level on which we can also approach this topic objectively.

While I understand that folks with a different aesthetic might possibly find Pete's gyrations ridiculous, for me they represent an ideal that was first expressed in records like 'Tutti Frutti', distilled to its essence by punk, and then explored with varying degrees of success by the American indie rock of the 1980s (all of which, but most especially The Clash, shaped me, inspiring me to pick up my own guitar and, eventually, smash it to pieces in front of an audience). That's one reason I made a point of weaving my own experiences into the piece – the bit about being stoned when I first saw the DVD is more than an introductory gag, just like the bit about my atheism is more than a soapbox for me to yammer on about my (lack of) religious beliefs. They're also keys to understanding why the moment I chose to dissect affected me the way it did, and clues to others as to why they may or may not disagree with what I had to say about it all.

Most human beings have a tendency to state their subjective reactions as though they're objective facts (they will say, 'The show was boring', when what they really mean is, 'I found the show boring'), so I can see the need for a set of conventions designed to prevent academics from making this mistake (and a belated apology – it's taken me 2,100 words to realise this is what you probably meant when you said the subjective viewpoint 'just assumes that the subject's eye view is valid'). But I'm convinced it would be a bigger mistake to assume subjective reactions themselves aren't worthy of sustained analysis by either journalists or academics (or folks who lack the pretension to define themselves as either one).

For what it's worth, I don't find your conclusion that academic and popular writing are 'each good in their own special way' particularly pious. But yeah, it's kind of bland, so let's turn it upside down and see if it looks any more interesting: I'd say that both types of writing have differently dysfunctional relationships with the truth. Pop journalists just assume their response to music is the only proper one, while scholars spend a lot of time trying to prove the same thing.

But both approaches can be illuminating despite themselves.

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Response 2

Jason Toynbee

Let me say a couple of things about your criticisms of popular music academics. You do need to read Gracyk because, as you'll see, his argument about the primacy of recording over live performance in rock isn't about *preference*, but more an historical-philosophical analysis of the way recording is *proper* to rock. He's got a strong point here. From rock and roll on, the record becomes the primary text. The sounds we hear are now virtual, the product of studio manipulation, and the process of recording ceases to be the mere documentation of a preceding live performance, or enactment of a score as in the case of jazz or classical music. Live continues of course, but in the shadow of the recorded. There are criticisms to be made of a certain rock essentialism in Gracyk – what he discusses is actually latent in all genres in the era of recording. But that's another story.

With Auslander you make the mistake of thinking that he is a frustrated journalist. The urge to explain (however poetically) why one likes or dislikes a piece of music, or a style or format, lies at the heart of the best journalism. As I said earlier, that's its great strength. But such a goal doesn't exhaust inquiry into music or other cultural forms. What Auslander's up to is something different – a *political* analysis of mediation and its relation to live performance. As he puts it, 'in the context of a mediatised, repetitive economy, using the technology of reproduction in ways that defy that economy may be a more significantly oppositional gesture than asserting the value of the live'. In other words, if mediatised culture has become pernicious, then we can best challenge it on its own ground. Auslander offers video art as an example, but we might also include all kinds of reflexive techno-music from Phil Spector to hip hop. Crucially, Auslander's advocacy is not a matter of evaluation – 'I like recordings because . . .' (p. 409) in your words. Rather it is part of a critique of mass culture which refuses the reactionary path of just endorsing older, more naturalised forms.

As for the explanatory power of metaphor (the topic you come to after your bout with the academics), once again I agree. Aesthetic responses are notoriously difficult to explain in ordinary language, partly because of their complexity. That is one reason why good journalism is so good. It doesn't try to analyse how a musical evaluation is made, but instead *translates* an aesthetic response through the use of vivid allusion, metaphor, hyperbole and so on. Journalism is thus evaluation in-process-in-words. Whereas academic analysis of music is generally an analysis of responses: what in the music prompts a certain listening in the case of musicology, or how is that listening organised socially in sociology. Always, and frustratingly, such work will employ more abstract terms than those used in journalism. As you say, two 'differently dysfunctional relationships with the truth'.

Response 2

Tim Quirk

Trust me, I never mistook Auslander for a journalist – frustrated or otherwise – and I understand his analysis is political. My reduction of his point ('I like recordings because . . .') was clearly too clumsy, but I stand by my contention that the academic

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method is leading him astray by encouraging him to fault others for their subjectivity while ignoring his own. He critiques those who 'valorise the live over the mediatised', chiding them for 'anxiety' and 'melodrama', and dismissing such views as 'ideological in nature'. The tone suggests he's above such subjective contamination himself, which may be why his effort to get people to re-evaluate mediatised performances relies on such a ridiculous demonstration that there's no objective difference between the two. If his intent was to get me to view mediatised performances as useful oppositional weapons, I think he would have been better served by making a more openly impassioned plea.

As for Gracyk, you've made me more inclined to read him. While I'm happy to agree that recordings have become the primary text for popular music for the majority of listeners with the majority of music being made in a wide variety of genres, and that both the nature and function of music recordings have changed as they've ceased to be mere documents of live performances, there are plenty of musicians and fans (and I'm one of both) who consider recordings and live performances separate but equal musical experiences. I was just reading a Dylan quote that expressed this sentiment nicely (actually, it was a session musician from the *Street Legal* sessions paraphrasing Dylan) in *MOJO*: he called the record, 'these songs, recorded by these musicians, on this day' (Jobes 2004, p. 63) – the implication being that he had no desire to capture definitive versions of his latest batch of songs, and that they can and should sound different when performed by a new set of musicians on a different day. Live performance may, as you say, now happen 'in the shadow of' the recorded, but the stuff that happens in the shadows is often a lot more interesting than what goes on in clean, well-lighted places.

Look at that. We've both fallen back on metaphors. I'm glad we agree about their explanatory power, but before I sign off I want to make sure we're not drawing an arbitrary distinction about their usefulness, as there's a hint in your last paragraph that metaphors are great for sharing aesthetic responses, but maybe not as good when rigorously analysing those responses. I think you've already debunked that notion with your eloquent summary of Derrida's take on signatures. Derrida's musings on that subject function at once as a lovely metaphor *and* a convincing argument.

Perhaps they can also serve as a target worth aiming for, even if it's incredibly difficult to hit. Any writer who relies solely on objective truths is a bit like a scientist who's doomed to slice a particular substance in half endlessly in a fruitless quest for its indivisible essence. Sometimes you just have to accept you've gotten as close to the truth as you can without rolling another joint and watching that Who video again.

Which sounds like a very good idea, actually.

Endnotes

1. 'This Magic Moment: capturing the spirit and impact of music', Experience Music Project, Seattle, 15–18 April, 2004.
2. Clip taken from an interview Townshend gave the BBC in 1977 as seen in *The Kids Are Alright* (Stein 2003/1979).
3. 'Crafting sounds, creating meaning', Experience Music Project, Seattle, 11–14 April, 2002.
4. About 2 minutes and 40 seconds into the song, for those reading along at home, or 10:55 into the entire 1996 DVD of the show released by Pulsar Productions, Inc. All Isle of White performance clips taken from *The Who Live At The Isle Of White Festival 1970* (Lerner 1996).
5. 52:03 on Lerner (1996).
6. 'Skip a Beat: rewriting the story of popular music', Experience Music Project, Seattle, 10–13 April, 2003.
7. 13:08 on Lerner (1996).
8. 11:48 on Lerner (1996).
9. Pretty much everything from 11:48 to the end of the song.

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