

I NEVER HEARD NO HORSE PLAY GUITAR

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I

Discussions of authenticity in music typically focus on historical authenticity in performance, and tend to draw on examples from classical and pre-classical genres. Yet popular music calls on other concepts of authenticity; concepts which are confidently deployed by its audience, but which can be surprisingly difficult to explicate.

In what follows I offer an account of one important concept of authenticity applied to popular music: I do not claim that it is the only understanding of authenticity in play. My paper draws on ideas common in discussions of the authenticity of tribal and folk arts, but not, as far as I know, generally applied to music. In it, I take a fairly catholic view of popular music: a rough and ready definition might be that this is music of mass appeal, in which the central figure is the performer, rather than the absent composer. As such it includes at least folk, blues, jazz, rock music and their sub-genres: my discussion is focussed on European and North American music.

My title, by the way, comes from a response to the question 'Is it folk music?', which is attributed in various forms to Sonny Boy Williamson, Louis Armstrong and Big Bill Broonzy: 'It's all folk music. Leastways, I never heard no horse play guitar.' This illustrates the main theme of my paper: all popular music is folk music, belonging to one or another group of folk. The closeness of the match between the folk it belongs to, and those it purports to belong to will determine its authenticity. Certain performances will be as incongruous in this respect as a horse playing guitar.

II

Let me begin with two short histories, both quite well known and, I believe, representative applications of the concept of authenticity that I have in mind.

From the 1920s onwards Alan Lomax travelled across the United States collecting music for the Library of Congress Archive of Folksong. In 1940 Lomax met the singer Woody Guthrie, and although the Library of Congress collection was set up to preserve traditional folk music, he felt justified in recording Guthrie's original songs. Why? Because, according to Lomax's associate John Steinbeck: 'Woody ... sings the songs of a people and I suspect he is, in a way, that people' (in Lomax 1967: 9, see also Cray 2004: 175).

In 1991 the journalist Steve Lamacq interviewed the Manic Street Preachers, at that stage a little known band from the Welsh valleys. Continuing a long running antagonism, he accused them of presenting a false front; of lacking substance; of masquerading as successors to the punk bands of the 1970s. Songwriter Richey Edwards tried to argue that the band were really speaking for people like themselves, then, apparently frustrated by his difficulty in convincing Lamacq, took out a razor blade and carved the words '4 Real' into his arm. He needed 17 stitches (Pattie 1999).

We might explain these stories in different ways. Maybe Lomax was merely looking for an acceptable way of recording someone whose music he liked; perhaps Edwards was just a troubled exhibitionist. There is probably some truth in each of these explanations. However, I want to suggest that in both of these stories there are also judgements about authenticity taking place: an authenticity which Lomax and Steinbeck professed to recognise in Guthrie, and which Edwards was trying to claim (I am neutral on the question of whether these judgements were correct). While the circumstances of these stories are unique, I suggest that the notion of authenticity involved is widespread.

There are of course a number of distinct criteria by which music or musicians may be authentic or inauthentic; here I am concerned with only one. This criterion will not apply in every instance: there will be cases where a judgement of authenticity on this basis is simply

inappropriate, those where no such authenticity is being claimed or credited. I say more about these below.

Before we can decide what sort of authenticity is in question here, we must decide what it is that is being judged authentic. In the case of classical and pre-classical music, the focus is often on an individual performance. In the case of popular music, is a judgement of authenticity a judgement about the performers, their music, or individual performances of that music?¹ Where the music is written and performed by the same individuals, it seems difficult to separate these. The performer may be validated by the authenticity of their music and their performance; yet once that authenticity is established, new and often very different music can be validated by being performed by just that musician (consider the career of a chameleon like Bob Dylan, once he broke free from the clutches of the folk revival). We must make a beginning somewhere however, and if the authenticity of performers depends in the first place on the authenticity of their music and performance, perhaps we should start with these.

Do we need to consider a musical work as distinct from its performance? We could go either way: Guthrie would have been an important writer even if he had never performed his songs, and Lomax published those songs in print versions as well as recording his performance. That suggests that we might be able to make a judgement of the music independent of particular performances. On the other hand, as I have just said, authenticity may depend on songs being performed in certain ways by certain musicians: some performances of Guthrie's songs might lack his own authenticity. On balance, I think this is decisive. For present purposes, I shall deal only with music in performance.

In order to structure the investigation, I will adopt some categories proposed by Denis Dutton (2003). For Dutton, judgements about authenticity in artworks fall into two categories: *nominal authenticity*, relating to the accuracy of claims about the origins or provenance of a work; and *expressive authenticity*, the extent to which a work is 'a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs' (2003: 259). It is controversial whether or not

¹ I am here deploying the very notion of authenticity that I purport to be analysing, but I can see no way around this. I hope that even if the concept is as yet unexplained, the use that I make of it is tolerably clear.

performances of music are themselves artworks, but to discuss this adequately would involve something of a digression, taking me further into ontological questions than I wish to go (some of these questions are explored by Kivy (1995: 122ff), who concludes that performances are indeed artworks). Whichever way we decide this issue, I think we can apply Dutton's categories to musical works as they are realised in performance.

It is not nominal authenticity that is in question here, if that depends on the accuracy of claims about the origins or history of the music itself. After all, it is clear that Guthrie was not singing traditional folk songs, and both Lamacq and Edwards knew that The Manic Street Preachers were 15 years too late to be counted among the original punk bands. Also, while failures of this sort may be a cause for censure (no one likes a forger) this sort of authenticity is not a cause for commendation: it is no more than we expect. Lomax and Steinbeck did not champion Guthrie because he was honest about the provenance of his songs. I think there are questions about nominal authenticity that arise in these cases, but they relate specifically to the performance or the performer. I will say more about them towards the end of the paper.

What about Dutton's second category, of expressive authenticity? This looks promising. Dutton refers to both an individual's and a society's values and beliefs, and I shall deal with these in turn.

Quite what it is that music expresses, and how it does so, are difficult and disputed questions. We might approach the idea that an authentic performance truly expresses an *individual's* beliefs and values via a closely related concept, which Kivy (1995) calls *personal authenticity*. One plausible way of glossing such personal authenticity, as Kivy points out, is in terms of sincerity. This implies that playing music must be the sort of thing that can be done sincerely: it must be an expression of emotion or an assertion. If this is the case, then an authentic performance will be one that involves sincere expressions of emotion or sincere assertions (*ibid*: 109).

As Kivy shows, there are difficulties in understanding musical authenticity as the sincere expression of emotion. A failure to bring out the emotional qualities of the music, for example, is a technical failure or an interpretational decision, not a lack of authenticity. Similarly, a failure to align one's own feelings with the feelings expressed or aroused by the music does not amount to

inauthenticity; we cannot expect musicians to run the emotional gamut every time they perform (*ibid*: 112).

Kivy objects that equating authenticity with sincere assertion supposes that music is capable of communicating unambiguous assertions (he rejects this as a ‘literary’ model of music (*ibid*: 121)). This is certainly a problem with purely instrumental music, but much popular music—including the two examples I have cited—is music with words. In these cases, surely, a number of assertions are being made, and the music might be more or less authentic to the extent that these assertions are sincere. I think there is something to be said for this, provided we allow that what is being asserted may not always be explicit. We cannot expect every performance to express only opinions that the performer would be willing to assert at that moment (where would that leave those like Randy Newman who write in several personae, or those singing love songs written for a departed lover?). What we can expect is that what we might call the broad intention of the songs is something that the singer could, in the appropriate circumstances, honestly own.

Yet even if this sort of sincerity is a necessary condition for expressive authenticity, it is not a sufficient condition. A musician might be perfectly sincere in what they assert yet not be authentic, in the sense of authenticity that I am examining.

Kivy himself proposes that a performance with personal authenticity is one that arises from the performer’s distinctive personality; it is ‘the unique product of a unique individual’ (*ibid*: 123). This may seem some way from Dutton’s notion of a work expressing an individual’s values and beliefs, but perhaps a particular combination of values and beliefs is part of what makes an individual unique.

The idea that authenticity in popular music is related to individuality is not uncommon. For instance, with respect to rock music, Gracyk endorses the idea that ‘the unique individual is basic to authenticity’ (1996: 220). Yet while individuality may be valued as contributing to a good or interesting performance, it is hard to see why it should be a necessary condition for authenticity (except in the trivial case of the performer’s authentic *self*-expression). Neither is it a sufficient condition, just as sincerity is not sufficient. Guthrie’s sincerity was not in doubt, but neither was Edwards’, and there was no question that each produced performances expressing

their individuality. Yet one was credited with authenticity, the other was not. The concept of authenticity in play must rest on something else.

Authenticity in popular music cannot only be a matter of expressive authenticity in Dutton's first sense, that of expressing an individual's values or beliefs. Could it be a matter of expressing the values or beliefs of a society or perhaps some group within a society?

I take it that we can use the word 'culture' as shorthand for the values (including aesthetic values) and beliefs of a society, or societal sub-group (I am assuming that we can identify groups whose members share broadly similar, if not entirely homogenous, values and beliefs). Among other things a culture is also a collection of ways of expressing those values and beliefs. If so, then it is undeniable that all performances are the expression of some culture or another. But they may express a given culture more or less well. There are performances that do express the culture they purport to represent, others that express only some misunderstood or debased form of that culture—or perhaps they express another culture altogether; that of the outsider, or the clueless. Consider on the one hand, The Fisk Jubilee Singers; on the other, *The Black and White Minstrel Show*.

Here then is the way of understanding authenticity that I want to propose: performances that arise from and express the culture they purport to express are authentic performances, and by extension performers that regularly give such performances are authentic performers. This definition is not circular: while performers are defined as authentic by the performances they give, performances are authentic if they truly express a culture.

We might ask how a performance 'purports' to express a culture. One answer is that the performance is presented as, or (with the connivance of the performer) taken by its audience to be, an expression of that culture. There are obvious cases: explicit claims about the music by the performer, or those marketing it; the regular reference to it by critics and others as expressive of that culture, and so on. There may also be other, more subtle instances.

In other cases, a performance may not purport to express much at all about the music's originating culture; a cabaret singer performing a song in blues or samba style is not taken to be claiming that these are authentic performances of blues or samba. They may be presenting them only as authentic cabaret performances, or making no claims about authenticity at all (so maybe

I am being too hard on *The Black and White Minstrel Show*—in this respect, at least). Other similar examples might include conscious pastiche, or performances given as lecture illustrations. Any judgement about this type of authenticity can only be made on the basis of what is claimed to be the case.

I want to illustrate this distinction between what is claimed and what is expressed by adopting an analogy that may be surprising. Dutton illustrates this strand of expressive authenticity by referring to the distinction between folk art that is an expression of a culture and has a role in such a culture, and ‘tourist art’, which may use the same techniques, but which is produced solely for sale to visitors.² I suggest that this provides a parallel to the sort of cases I am considering. Authentic popular music has a role within the culture whose forms of expression it uses; inauthentic music does not. It may have many of the same stylistic features but it is produced for, and frequently by, outsiders. So Guthrie is acknowledged as standing within the culture he presents. The Manic Street Preachers are accused of being outsiders.

The discussion of tourist art makes a link between truly expressing a culture, and having a role within that culture; the sort of examples that are cited are the mask that has been ‘danced’ in a ceremony, or the statue used for ritual purposes, as opposed to those that are bought as ornaments by outsiders (Dutton 2003: 264; Shiner 1994: 226). This suggests that it may not be the origin of the work, so much as its use by the group in question that matters in determining its authenticity. Popular music may originate from the group whose culture it expresses, or it may originate elsewhere, and be adopted by them as a way of expressing that culture (consider the adoption of Jamaican ska by white skinheads).³ An authentic performance then, is one that would be accepted by the members of the cultural community as playing the appropriate expressive role within their culture.

Being an authentic performer is being a true representative of a culture, and this is a status one gains by giving performances that truly express that culture. Notice that in both my

² Shiner (1994) challenges this ‘ideology of authenticity’ as it applies to tribal art, but I do not think his challenge counts against the use I make of the folk art/tourist art distinction. There is a parallel discussion about whether both types of production are artworks (e.g. Dutton 1993): I am not concerned with this.

³ Gramsci (1985: 195) draws attention to this sort of phenomenon in his discussion of Rubieri’s taxonomy of popular music.

examples representativeness matters: Guthrie ‘is [the] people’; Edwards insists that his band speak for people like themselves. That representative status cannot be assumed. According to Simon Frith, rock musicians:

... begin their careers by expressing the interests of a real community ... the problem of their authenticity ... emerges later, when they are recording stars (1983: 75).

An authentic performer represents a cultural community, and in moving away from that community she loses this authenticity. It should be clear that this is not just a matter of sincere assertion. The performer’s identification of herself with a cultural community must be sincere, but this is not sufficient to guarantee her authenticity: she may still be mistaken, having a false sense of belonging. Being an authentic performer in this sense has to do with having the appropriate authority: one has a licence to represent, but that licence may be revoked.

On what does this authority rest? In part, on the performer’s individual talents: she must have the skills necessary to represent the culture in performance, but while this may give her authority as a performer, it is insufficient to give her authority to represent. There is something about being entitled to perform the music, and one gains this entitlement only by being accepted as representative by the appropriate cultural group.⁴ Having the necessary skills may be a condition of being so accepted, but it is not sufficient to guarantee acceptance. One must also express that culture, and that is something one can only do from within the culture. Recall the discussions, periodically revived, about whether white men can sing the blues or more specifically, whether Paul Whiteman played jazz: simply adopting a form of expression is not enough to give truly representative performances. This is not to say that cultural communities are impenetrable by outsiders. As the example of ska music suggests, a performer can be adopted by a given group, their performances taken up as expressive of the culture.

So far I have considered this as an issue of expressive authenticity. Earlier, I wrote that there was a sense in which it is also an issue of nominal authenticity, and this may already be apparent. This is it: an authentic performer truly expresses the culture she purports to express; an

⁴ Burns Coleman discusses this issue as it relates to Aboriginal art in her illuminating (2001) paper.

inauthentic performer does not. However much she resembles the genuine article, the inauthentic performer is not what she claims to be: she is a fake. This is a question of provenance, but it is the provenance of the performer and her performances that matter, not that of the individual musical work.

III

This brief treatment has perforce left certain questions unresolved. Notably how it is that performers are accepted as representative, and the related question of whether in every case the authenticity of performance is prior to that of performer, or vice versa. I have also been unable to fully explore controversial notions such as *culture* or *sincerity*. However, I hope that this suggests some fruitful ways of connecting discussions of authenticity in different spheres. By drawing a parallel with tribal folk arts, this approach encourages us to consider popular music as just such a folk art (Cf. Frith 1983: 75), expressing the values and beliefs of a given cultural community. The extent to which musical performances (or performers) are authentic, in the sense I have considered, depends on the extent to which they truly represent that community.⁵

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