USE AND INFLUENCE OF AMATEUR MUSICIAN NARRATIVES IN FILM, 1981-2001

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This dissertation is an analytical survey of four amateur musician narratives created between 1981 and 2001. Unlike purportedly true, marketing-driven uses of amateur narratives, the four narratives chosen for this project are unabashed total fictions. Despite this, the films achieve levels of perceived “authenticity” by way of cultural value and influence. None of the narratives deal with amateur musicianship as a stage or step in an inherent progression towards professionalism, as seems a prerequisite for the recollections of the now professional. But all include narratives of amateur musicians struggling to make it against “insurmountable commercial odds” resulting from an artist’s gender, talent, ability, or identity. Despite this, none treat hegemonically dictated concepts of commercial success, wealth, fame, and stardom as the ultimate and/or desired goal of amateurism or semiprofessionalism. The films all present concepts of accomplishment in challenge of hegemonic notions of professional dominance and commercial success as markers of success. The four films, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* (1981), *Ishtar* (1987), *Half-Cocked* (1995), and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), are culturally representative of their respective eras, but have experienced lasting cultural influence in both filmmaking and music making. The films exist as prototypical examples of amateur musicians narratives, performance, and media common to the 20th Century “rise of the amateur” as found on the Internet, in reality programming, and marketing tragedies.
Dedicated to Carolyn and the cats for enduring Northwest Ohio winter with me and to the memory of Nick Buono who first taught me that popular culture is important.
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INTRODUCTION. AMATEUR MUSICIAN NARRATIVES: FACTUAL, FILMIC, FICTIONAL, AND FABRICATED

This dissertation is an analytical survey of four amateur musician narratives created between 1981 and 2001. Unlike purportedly true, marketing-driven uses of amateur narratives, the four narratives chosen for this project are unabashed total fictions. So as to remove the possibility of nostalgic or egotistical inflation of events, poor memories, or exaggerations tainting claims of truth, all the narratives chosen for analysis are fabrications created for film (and one pre-film musical play). They are not real in the sense that they can make no claim of authenticity derived from experience or “truth,” though I will make claims about the perceived authenticity of all of the films. Significantly, none of the narratives deals with amateur musicianship as a stage or step in an inherent progression towards professionalism, as seems a prerequisite for the recollections of the now professional. In fact, even though an eventual success of sorts is depicted in all four of the films, the success is an unorthodox one not always in agreement with common measurements of professional success based on commercial accomplishment, large-scale notoriety, and/or recognition of talent or hard work. Interestingly, none of the films included herein were large-scale commercial successes, thereby adding cultural value to their narratives’ unorthodox treatment of what “success” means.

The first two films discussed, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* (Paramount, 1981) and *Ishtar* (Columbia, 1987), were produced by major film studios. Lack of commercial success for both films led the industry and media to label them “flops.” *Half-Cocked* (self-released, 1995) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (New Line, 2001), both produced “independently,” met with perceived relative success. With the exception of *Hedwig*, all of the main characters in the films are presented as being “amateurishly bad,” lacking basic skills,
dexterity, and/or talent necessary for even marginal success. Despite this, the characters achieve success by way of exploitation (either of or by the media in Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains), backroom dealings (in Ishtar), theft (in Half-Cocked), and/or the construction and deconstruction of public personae and identity (in Hedwig and the Angry Inch). Finally, all the productions feature casts and crews with both musical and filmmaking backgrounds. Because of this, cultural and professional experiences inform “authentic” representations of musical cultures rather than ill-informed referential treatment of amateur and semiprofessional musician cultures.

The temporal bookends (1981 and 2001) are part happenstance from researching dozens of rock and roll films and television programs searching for fictional struggling musicians whose careers are clearly subprofessional. Focusing on media depicting amateurs during the 1980s and 1990s is also an attempt to explore music culture after punk and postpunk’s influence in the early 1980s (when I believe the “authenticity” of amateurism became more commercially desirable) and before the Internet’s influence in the early 2000s (when the access to media produced by amateurs greatly expanded). It is also the period of my own life in which I became aware of music outside a perceived mainstream, first as a listener and student, and eventually as a creator and performer (though I have never stopped being a student or listener). It was when I realized that there are radio stations besides the Top 40 stations of my youth—other options besides Michael Jackson, Lionel Ritchie, and Paul McCartney—and learned of music in clubs, basements, and bars. I suppose we are all guilty of favoring our own time, but I believe the 1980s and 1990s are particularly interesting in relation to the “rise of the amateur” in the early 21st Century.
Media featuring amateur performances and/or narratives certainly gained in popularity and visibility in the early 21st Century: “MySpace bands” who used a grassroots approach to climbing a commercial ladder, *Making the Band* and *American Idol*-type reality programming, *Behind the Music*-style documentary, and YouTube videos broadcast “live” from the recording studio and bedrooms. In the study of amateurism in the decades preceding this rise, we may begin to explore cultural notions regarding this rise beyond surface and technological observations. While the history of professional media culture in the Western world has always been sprinkled with aspects of amateur performance, in the waning years of the 20th Century and the waxing years of the 21st, as channels of distribution increased, interconnectivity grew, and technology and production costs decreased, the “cross-over” seemed to not only occur more often, but its narrative became more compelling.

Rich with potential metaphor, the amateur narrative seems able to convey strife, credibility, and authenticity. The amateur musician narrative is, on one level, a very “American story.” It is the stuff of Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, Alan Trachtenberg, Disney, John Wayne, and Horatio Alger. It is the story of the underdog, the “little guy.” It *seems* to encompass a classic American narrative (“local boy makes good,” to “come from nowhere,” or becoming an “overnight sensation”). It likely has some combination of struggle, adversity, marginality (often self-created), and perseverance in the face of insurmountable odds. But, for the story to work in the sense of a “classic American” film narrative, the amateur needs to progress to an eventual point of resolution. For amateurism, that resolution is professionalism. This resolution would seem to imply a necessity for amateurism to be a passage to professionalism. In a sense, it would imply that the liminal stage of semiprofessionalism (the actual experiential space between the idealized extremes of the pure amateur and the established professional), the space of struggle
and source of conflict and resolution so desirable to the narrative, is merely a passageway to an eventual goal. Without an eventual succession to commercial professionalism, the amateur narrative begins to challenge notions of professionalism’s superiority. In a sense, if the amateur does not strive for (and ideally ultimately attain) a level of commercial professionalism—complete with success, popularity, fame, and wealth—instead “settling” for a point of professional stasis somewhere between economic sustainability and creative “authenticity,” the notion of desire for and popular agreement on the superiority of professionally created, marketed, and consumed culture is threatened. Without this progression, the story is unsuccessful by commercial standards. But, by cultural standards—those of subcultures, local scenes, and underground genres which may celebrate amateurism and subversive challenges to mainstream media professional superiority—this unsuccess may signal a certain authority unattainable, yet perpetually struggled-for, by those in the professional realms of cultural production.

As well as being an interesting and underexplored topic, the analysis of amateur musician narratives in film can begin to inform wider notions and perceptions regarding the relationship between professionalism and amateurism in culture beyond popular music and film. In the films to be discussed there is an attempt to present believable characters and a need for believable depictions of situations involving the culture depicted in the film. No matter how outlandish certain aspects of the plots may be in order to create vehicles with which to advance the story, the characters must be somewhat believable. Accordingly, the amateur musician characters and their narratives presented herein will often be explored in terms of metaphorical representation and their relationships with the real-life filmmakers, writers, and professional musicians (in some instances playing amateur musicians) involved in the making of the film. Within the confines of this project, that representation—the character’s filmic exposition, conflict, and resolution—is
often the creation of a socially marginalized filmmaker or author. *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* (originally titled *All Washed Up*) was written by once-coveted Hollywood writer Nancy Dowd, only to be “professionalized” by music industry mainstay Lou Adler, thereby altering the very nature of the story. Rather than success achieved for the marginalized (the young, working-class and female, specifically in rock music or American society in general) by way of noncommercial means, the main characters do “make it” commercially in Adler’s re-imagined ending. When viewed with this in mind, the film becomes a metaphor for Nancy Dowd’s short Hollywood career. *Ishtar* was the final film written and directed by Elaine May, whose tumultuous relationship with Hollywood dates from the 1950s (when she was one of only a few female comedians and comedy writers) to the 1980s (when she was one of only a few female film directors). *Ishtar*, in which two talentless songwriters achieve success by way of back room “games boys play,” may be interpreted as an allegory of May’s hindered success. Gender inequality could factor into the analysis of independent and obscure film *Half-Cocked* as well, but the factor of marginalization most relevant to this analysis is one based more in talent, cool, and quality. In the music being played, the film created, and the personae being projected/ performed, the issue of who made the movie, how they made it, and how they distributed it may be just as important as the movie. I argue that any perceived lack of quality misinterprets the film and misses commentary on independent music in the early 1990s. Finally, claims of importance and quality regarding *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* rely heavily on how the film, characters, music, and (filmic and real world) story were created. This not only informs the relationship between the inauthentic professional (Tommy) and the more authentic amateur (Hedwig) as a metaphor for identity itself (gender, sexual orientations, nationality, etc.) within the universe of the film, but also in the reception of the film. As stated earlier, the film’s relative
success is only made more relevant when viewed in conjunction with the narrative’s perception of the inauthentic nature of commercial success. Like *Half-Cocked, Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is an “independent film,” but unlike *Half-Cocked*, the film was (more) professionally made. This is not so much a value judgment as it is an observation of production methods. The role of amateurism in all the above films is of the utmost importance to their respective narratives, but *Half-Cocked* is the “most amateurish” of all the films’ productions. This may be why it can be a “successful” independent release and *Ishtar* can be a “colossal, embarrassing Hollywood film flop with few to no redeeming aspects” (Parish 167-8).

The Amateur

In order to discuss amateur narrative, we must first work towards a definition of “amateur.” Amateurism is an oft-overlooked, rarely explored concept in contemporary Western society. Its relationship to notions of “professional” and “professionalism” is irremovable, but merely defining in opposition (i.e., an amateur is not a professional) seems inadequate. Between the extremes of the absolute amateur and the undeniable professional—which are, in a limited binary understanding of the concepts, extremely idealized—there is a liminal space of “semiprofessionalism.” Recently, inspired perhaps by the rise of the public consumption of amateur-created media and culture via Internet-based arenas such as YouTube and MySpace, self-described “pioneer of the first Internet gold rush,” (1) Andrew Keen produced *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture.* Keen “once dreamed of making the world a more musical place,” but defected from the camp of supporters who he claims saw the Internet as a tool to democratize information in order to nurture the “noble amateurs” of the web.

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1 Keen’s book has also been published under the titles *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy* and *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today’s User-Generated Media are Destroying Our Economy, Our Culture, and Our Values.*
In almost direct opposition to Keen’s desire to hear Bob Dylan and other “great music” emitting from every digital “orifice,” he began to see that the intent of the re-imagined “Web 2.0” (a term coined by new media pioneer Tim O’Reilly applied to the “second generation” of the Internet following the rise and fall of the Silicon Valley startups) was not to spread the great culture of the past to the masses. Of Web 2.0’s new focus, Keen states: “The new Internet was about self-made music, not Bob Dylan or the Brandenburg Concertos. Audience and author had become one, and we were transforming culture into cacophony” (7). In this new arena, Keen states the “words of a wise man count for no more than the mutterings of a fool” (36). Although the Internet has greatly increased access to such “mutterings,” greatly widening the conduit between creator and receiver and thus confusing previously fabricated and applied roles of “wise man” and “fool,” the creation of culture by nonprofessional entities, the consumption of such culture by the masses, and even an appreciation of what Keen sees as lesser culture standing between him and proper cultural products are not new. While Keen may reject the cluttering of the Internet by amateurs and amateur-created media and culture, I applaud it. Rather than reinforcing hegemonic controls of quality and distribution, many of the apparatuses Keen sees as detrimental to the preservation of “our” culture challenge cultural and commercial hegemony and allow for entry, access, and distribution of culture and media previously unattainable by many. The amateur does not destroy culture by being appreciated or acknowledged.

Robert A. Stebbins, a Canadian scholar of American birth and self-proclaimed one-time amateur chamber musician, has devoted the whole of his academic life to the study of amateurism, “serious leisure,” and the realm of what I am calling the semiprofessional. However, the study of amateur popular music (rock and roll and related genres performed without official organizational affiliation) has never been Stebbins’s primary area of interest. The distinction
between amateur and professional—and in what way the liminal “semiprofessional” fits—is a distinction so unclear that it brings into question the very binary opposition formed by its relationship. In 1979’s *Amateurs*, Stebbins ranked levels between amateur and professional to create a hierarchy of the “player,” “dabbler,” “dilettante,” “devotee,” “preprofessional,” “participant,” and “postprofessional.” Showcasing ever-altering distinctions and delimitations, Stebbins added the “amateur purist,” the “hobbyist,” and the “marginal man of leisure” in 2007’s *Serious Leisure*. Perhaps Stebbins’s ever-changing classification system is based on his observation that “transformation in the meaning of ‘amateur’” occurs as “old definitions cling tenaciously, combining in common discourse with new ones that have emerged to describe modern amateurism” (*Amateurs* 21). The result, according to Stebbins, is that the “idea of amateur is […] used with an annoying imprecision in both everyday life and sociological thought” (*Amateurs* 21). Sadly, even with nearly thirty years since Stebbins’s own initial contributions to the study of amateurism, very little has changed since he stated in 1979 “so little sociological writing deals directly with the notion of amateur” (22).

Stebbins’s classification system is, even by his own account, a malleable system. In fact, despite his desire for definable classification, Stebbins finds problems in the placing of the amateur in competition with the professional.

[W]e must avoid the unidimensional thinking that pits the amateur against the professional in terms of, for example, little versus great skill, intrinsic versus extrinsic reward, avocational versus vocational orientation, or leisure versus work. While *under certain conditions* [emphasis in the original] such dichotomies accurately describe their relationship, under many other conditions […] they badly distort that relationship. The way out of this conceptual morass is to shift our
theoretical perspective to broader, more sociological definitions of the amateur as member of a professional-amateur-public system and as one who has a distinct attitudinal structure. (*Amateurs* 44)

This “professional-amateur-public system,” allows Stebbins to analyze concepts of amateurism (in 1979’s *Amateurs*, he analyzes amateurs in archaeology, theater, and baseball) with unwanted static removed.

The foregoing presentation of the professional-amateur-public system suggests a number of implications that can assist us in achieving a clearer conception of the amateur. At present, the term “amateur” is applied to too many people with too little in common, such as practitioners, consumers (audiences, spectators, and so on), nonpracticing experts, and critics.

One implication is that amateurs are people who engage part-time in activities that, for other people, constitute full-time work roles. One cannot be an amateur butterfly catcher or matchbook collector; no opportunity for full-time employment exists here. Such forms of leisure are referred to later as “hobbies,” which lie outside any P-A-P [professional-amateur-public] system. (*Amateurs* 27-8)

For purposes of this project, I will use the term “amateur” or “semiprofessional” in places where Stebbins might use the term “novice” or some other distinction. I see little reason for either strictly following Stebbins’s standards or creating my own classification system. I can cite two important reasons for this. First, professionalism in regards to the subjects discussed herein is not an attainable, stable rank or membership. Professional status, especially in regards to popular music, is, like fame and success, potentially fleeting. For example, just because the Flaming Lips achieved professional success in the early 1990s with the release of a minor
“crossover” hit and a major label record deal, they did not solidify their place in professional music until over a decade later. (The Flaming Lips’s particular usage of amateurism will be briefly discussed further below.) Even their current status is always potentially at risk and possesses no inherent permanence. Today’s hit maker may be tomorrow’s “one hit wonder” or “where are they now?” subject. What is important in regards to the fictional narratives being discussed here is that they are not common stories of professional popular music (“rock and roll excess,” hedonistic debauchery, celebrity, and wealth) and the characters’ interactions with professionalism are strained “fish out of water” narratives. The other reason is that I am sure that there actually is “opportunity for full-time employment” in butterfly catching and matchbook collecting. Lepidopterology (the study of butterflies and moths) is a recognized branch of entomology and one could certainly establish a professional identity as a recognized collector of matchbook covers by way of publishing a book on the subject.

Stebbins states that much of his initial research was an attempt to define what an “amateur” actually is. Indeed, “amateur” is a word that seems easily understood and recognized, but when one is prompted to do so, it is difficult to define. Previously, in 1930, Elizabeth Todd, less concerned with the intricacies and malleable nature of amateurism, stated simply “[t]he amateur is one without professional training or experience who engages in something solely because he enjoys doing it” (18). Where she saw an unmoving and definable concept built upon clear binary opposition, Stebbins saw an altering and malleable theoretical field built upon strata.

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2 Formed in the early 1980s, the Flaming Lips were signed to Warner Bros. Records in the early 1990s, but lead singer Wayne Coyne continued to work at a Long John Silver’s fast food restaurant as fry cook. Despite being on a major record label, he was only a semiprofessional musician in the sense that he was also a fry cook. Coyne’s first album as “a professional” (during which he finally quit Long John Silver’s) produced an alternative hit titled “She Don’t Use Jelly.” Despite this crossover success, the band toiled in obscurity for the following decade until the 2002 release *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* catapulted the band to large-scale success.
I prefer to posit that the division between amateur and professional is one possessing not clearly defined stages, but instead comprises a fluctuating and ever-changing grey area of semiprofessionalism. Employing Arnold Van Gennep’s 1909 theories involving the liminal stage as a spiritual or social space between one identity and another (e.g., from childhood to adulthood) experienced in the midst of a physical rite of passage, I propose that “semiprofessional”—being neither distinctly amateur nor professional, yet having to often act as both—is a kind of liminal stage. Van Gennep states:

The door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and the sacred worlds in the case of the temple. Therefore to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world. It is thus an important act in marriage, adaptation, ordination, and funeral ceremonies.

(20)

In some societies, he noted, the period during which one is in the metaphoric threshold, when the subject is in the actual liminal space between what he/she was and what he/she is to become, is comparable to death. During this period, the subject, which Van Gennep identifies as “the novice” is “considered dead, and he [sic] remains dead for the duration of his [sic] novitiate. It lasts for a fairly long time and consists of a physical and mental weakening which is undoubtedly intended to make him [sic] lose all recollection of his [sic] childhood experience” (75). According to Van Gennep, to be in this liminal state indefinitely is not desirable. Citing Catholic belief that “children who die without baptism forever remain in the transitional zone, or limbo” (153) as an example, Van Gennep believes there exists a near-universal desire to move beyond the liminal state. This is the reason for the rite of passage.

The first phase (or separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a “state”), or from both. During the intervening “liminal” period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) are ambiguous; he [*sic*] passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. (94)

Turner’s assertion that “[l]iminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he [*sic*] who is high must experience what it is like to be low” (97) would suggest that the professional cannot exist without the amateur and that all professionals must have, at one time, experienced amateurism. This may be counterintuitive to the assumed definition-by–way-of-negation method of defining professional as simply being *not amateur*. Rather, the liminal space (the malleable concept of semiprofessionalism, possessing qualities of both professionalism and amateurism) may be the only clearly definable state.

Turner continues:

What appears to have happened is that with the increasing specialization of society and culture, with progressive complexity in the social division of labor, what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities “betwixt and between” defined states of culture, and society has become itself an institutional state. But traces of the passage quality of the religious life remain in such formulations as: “The Christian is a stranger in the world, a pilgrim, a traveler,
with no place to rest his head.” Transition has here become a permanent condition. (107)

Unlike the liminal phase of the rite of passage, transference to the entertainment professional (next stage) is neither likely nor always necessarily sought in modern Western society. The professional is more a conceptual theoretical identifier than a practical achieved stage of growth, development, or advancement.

In regards to modern popular music, it seems that many are quick to identify a “something” as being either amateur or professional in production, quality, or economics/commercialism. But the qualities that cause identification as amateur or professional have no set barriers. According, once again, to Stebbins, common-sense usage of the word “professional” may be based on the economic requirement that one gain at least half of his/her livelihood from a pursuit while the amateur might earn considerably less and the temporal requirement that the professional “spends considerably more time at his [sic] pursuit than does the amateur” (Amateurs 23). Disliking the vague nature of these distinctions, Stebbins focuses on the distinctions’ interdependence. This “interdependence” is the source of distinction between professional and amateur as distinctive not from each other, but from a “public” (audience or consumers of media and/or culture products produced by amateurs or professionals). But still the level of professional is reserved in this scheme for those who have achieved “standards,” “mastery,” “validation,” and “recognition.” Likewise, Stebbins (problematically) assigns the role of mere “hobbyist” to “folk artists” because “they perform or produce strictly for their own enjoyment and perhaps that of others in the same community” and “know little about professional standards of music, art, or theater” (Amateurs 34-5).
Musicologist Stephanie Pitts states that people can claim “the ‘musician’ label without feeling unduly immodest [by prefixing] it with ‘amateur’—or more often, ‘only an amateur’” (22). Pitts points out that “in the 1940s […] amateurs were central to music-making in a way unparalleled in the other arts” (23), but this is something that may need “encouraging” in contemporary society. Though focused more on organized professional and amateur music-making such as community orchestras, Pitts’s *Valuing Musical Participation* is interested in the interactions people have with music as active relationships rather than passive consumption. This concept is in agreement with Stuart Hall’s concepts of encoded and decoded messages and the active consumption of media. Likewise, the activities of amateur music-making may be “based on leisure [in that] they are voluntary and chosen, and they contain strong elements of play and enjoyment” (Fornäs 255), but in order to further explore meaning in media representations of music, there must be a sense that it is more than an act of leisure. While an act of leisure is not passive, the concept of a “leisure activity,” something done outside of one’s serious and professional existence, carries with it a stigma of dismissibility similar to notions of amateur media and culture as a lesser alternative to professionally produced culture and media.

The Recent Rise of the Mediated Amateur

A visit3 to the music subdirectory of Fox Interactive Media’s massive social networking site MySpace displays a plethora of “featured” and “exclusive” music and artists, links to “MySpace on Tour” and “MySpace Records” artists, and a number of other links, text, and images blurring the lines between informational directory and self-serving advertising. Several popular, hip, and “cutting edge” artists are featured, potentially presenting a sense of intimacy and interaction lacking in other media outlets. While he may never read them, fans of rapper

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3 This particular visit to music.myspace.com occurred on May 26, 2009, but could have easily occurred on any date in the past several years.
Eminem may post comments directly to his page that are then observable to any and all other fans who visit his page. While the pages of superstars like Eminem are likely handled by teams of publicists, these stars are ironically made to appear more human, more approachable, and more amateur by way of MySpace pages. On the one hand, MySpace is merely another arm of the massive media empire News Corporation helmed by Rupert Murdoch, which is also involved in television, film, books, newspapers, and other Internet sites. MySpace, by way of its MySpace Music subdivision, represents its primary interest in the music business, but is hardly its only involvement. The “other side” of MySpace is (however naively identified as such) a free space for unknown, un-commercial, and underground bands to host their music, collaborate with other geographically disconnected musicians, and network with fans, bands, promoters, producers, and (even) the corporate music industry. MySpace pages of unknown and unestablished artists are virtually the same as pages featuring famous and established artists. Levels and distinctions of creative investment, professionalism, or even quality have nothing to do with a band, musician, or artist signing up for a MySpace Music account, uploading a song, and potentially reaching anywhere from a handful to several hundred listeners all from a suburban basement. That is not to say that MySpace is antiestablishment, anti-commercial, democratic, or that divisions of genre, commercial potential, or amateurism/professionalism are completely erased. On the contrary, many of these divisions are brought more to the forefront (albeit in a manner seemingly new and unique) to the Internet.

Below all the images and known artists on the MySpace Music page (such as veterans 311, Phish, and Rancid; new artists such as Grizzly Bear and Jonas Brothers; and current MySpace Music flavor-of-the-moment Kate Voegele) is a list of MySpace Music’s top genres, complete with the number of artists contained within each respective genre. The way MySpace
Music’s categorization method works is that an artist can choose up to three potentially unrelated genres with which to describe his/her/their music. There are over 120 genres listed, ranging from the common (rock, rap, country, soul), to the vague (experimental, other, fusion), to the geographic (Dutch pop, J[apanese]-pop, Italian pop), to the uncommon (ghettotech, emotronic, idol). “Simple” genre classification, when constructed by way of a self-identified combination of three genres potentially chosen without necessary actual similarity to others in similar genre classifications or even basic knowledge of the genre, grow in complexity. There is nothing standing in the way of a musician in the United States who plays bluegrass music from classifying him/herself as a K[orean]-pop/Dutch pop/ghettotech artist. This creates an exponentially massive pool of possibly fabricated genre combinations, potentially meaningless yet delightfully playful. The more common genres and genre classification/combinations remain more common. Commercial artists tend to not stray far from orthodox and singular genre classifications while less known artists tend to treat the classifications less seriously. As of my May 2009 visit, the site listed its most popular genres as hip hop (2,682,753 artists), rap (2,534,305 artists), rock (1,898,020 artists), and R&B (1,672,610 artists), with no mentions of their “three way” combinations, but coming in a close fifth was other (1,130,460 artists) which seems to suggest a possible desire to debunk genre classification even with the possibility of a self-created combination of genres available. As Holt points out, “major [record] labels […] enforce a high degree of standardization [in regards to genre]”, while independent record labels and amateur music makers tend to value “a great deal of creativity and genre negotiation” (4).

In addition to genre classification, an artist who signs up for a MySpace Music account is also further divided by his/her level of professionalism, however vague those divisions are. The artist must self-identify as a major (label) artist, an independent (label) artist, or an unsigned
artist. So, though an artist may identify as being an “indie” artist in the sense of “indie” being a vague genre of music akin to alternative rock, the half million artists who identify as such are further split into three columns of unsigned, indie, and major artists organized into a hierarchy of popularity. Thus, it is possible, and rather common, for an artist to identify as an indie artist on a major label. Once again, in late May 2009, the top three “indie” artists, in their respective categories, were pop singer-songwriter Ingrid Michaelson (unsigned), alternative rock veterans Oasis (indie), and Las Vegas quartet The Killers (major). Michaelson is an example of a musician who has achieved a fair amount of success without a record label. Though her music is distributed via many of the more common channels of modern musical distribution (iTunes, MySpace, nonexclusive marketing deals with television programs, etc.), she is technically an unsigned artist who releases music on her own record label. Oasis once was one of the most popular and commercially successful bands in the mid-1990s. Their most popular albums of the mid 1990s (Definitely Maybe, (What's the Story) Morning Glory?, and Be Here Now) were all released by once-independently owned record label Creation Records. The label, commonly identified as an “indie label,” had been sold to Sony before Oasis was signed. Even their most recent release, 2008’s Dig Out Your Soul, was released by the band’s own Big Brother Records in the United Kingdom but distributed by Sony and by the Warner Bros.-owned Reprise Records in the United States. While the fact that the band can simultaneously release an album on two competing labels in different markets (both of which have the ability to globally release an album) or that the band’s own Big Brother Records still has a hand in their releases may be used to justify the band as technically independent, it is a far stretch from the actual independence from the record industry that is the desired narrative projected in their identification as an “indie” band.
While further distinctions between the projected narratives of independence, amateurism, rags-to-riches, etc. and the actual realities of many of the artists who claim often-diehard allegiances to such “anti-commercialism” have long existed in the world of popular and commercial music, recently narratives of popularity achieved “in spite” of amateur-allied “obstacles” have grown more common. Early stories regarding British pop singer Lily Allen, such as a December 2006 article in *The Independent*, focus on the fact that “[a] year ago, she was another hopeful uploading songs on MySpace. Today, even your parents know who Lily Allen is” (“Lily Allen: This year's girl…”). Early buzz surrounding acoustic guitarist/singer Marié Digby, who seemed to come from nowhere when her soft rendition of Rihanna’s pop hit “Umbrella” earned viral status on YouTube in 2007, seemed to identify her “as proof that the Internet is transforming the world of entertainment” (Smith and Lattman). Smith and Lattman’s article notes that Digby’s MySpace account identified her as an unsigned artist and an August 2007 blog post seems to add to the mystique of an amateur musician who had been caught up in a whirlwind of attention when she posted: “I NEVER in a million years thought that doing my little video of Umbrella in my living room would lead to [such levels of success].” At the time of her apparently viral and supposed self-made success, Digby was signed to the Disney-owned Hollywood Records, who “helped devise her Internet strategy, consulted with her on the type of songs she chose to post, and distributed a high-quality studio recording of ‘Umbrella’ to iTunes and radio stations” all with the intention of presenting Digby as just another amateur making videos of her favorite songs (Smith and Lattman).

The amateur musician narrative can be used as more than a purely commercial strategy. Soon after the most recent turn of the century, Oklahoma City rock veterans the Flaming Lips (mentioned above) became one of the most popular recording artists and live acts in popular
music. Their marketing, relentless touring, and spectacle-filled concerts—in tandem with a catalog of catchy, interesting, and varied songs—led the band to a state of rare duality in American popular music. They were both critical/fan favorites and commercially successful. All too often commercial success negates earlier critical acclaim and sends once loyal fans running. Acclaim a band garners as up-and-comers (before they were who they became, when they “paid their dues”) often wanes in the wake of commercial success. Critics may claim post-success music does not live up to the self-created standards set on less professional albums. Seemingly diehard fans come to dismiss the band for “selling out.” But the Flaming Lips—part far-out art rock, part vaudevillian song–and-dance men, part clown princes of alternative rock—seem able to span two often mutually exclusive territories. They are still cool despite being commercial. They are still very “indie” without being all too independent. On one hand, they are stadium-filling musical spokespersons for Dell, Mitsubishi, and Kraft; signed to a major record label; and, for all intents and purposes, part of the “corporate machine” of the commercial recording industry (albeit a relatively strange part). On the other hand their aesthetic is steeped in homemade do-it-yourself-ness, as much an ascribed punk and indie rock trait as it is a cultural badge of their beginnings. Their concerts feature unchoreographed fans dressed in animal costumes dancing on stage, cartoon-like confetti-launching cannons scattered throughout the venue, precisely synched video (often featuring self-reflexive and self-mocking reappropriations of their hodgepodge of media appearances), and singer Wayne Coyne’s voyages physically atop the heads and extended hands of concert crowds in an inflated clear plastic bubble. In concert, Coyne wears a suit, but it is apparently the same sweat-soaked and wrinkled suit worn night after night, city after city. The spectacle is huge and unquestionably informed by and often in homage to the professional stadium rock of the 1970s, but in a sort of kids playing make-believe in the
backyard kind of way. The “great and powerful Oz” is clearly visible from behind the curtain of a Flaming Lips show. Often, he is in front of the curtain, under a spotlight with attention purposely drawn toward him. Roadies, musicians, and fans commingle on stage both preceding and during the performance. Lines distinguishing roles of performer, support, and fan are purposely blurred. This is clearly a trait uncommon in the corporate world of professional music. But, as stated earlier, the Flaming Lips are a rarity in professional popular music. To say that despite their level of commercial professionalism they possess a level of amateurism is not meant as a negative critique. The Flaming Lips continue to embrace amateurism, either actively or unintentionally challenging the norms of professional presentation, popular music, media, and performance. They surely would not be able to “pull off” the large scale production that is the “Flaming Lips in concert” without their current level of professionalism (human-sized hamster balls must be expensive), but the show would not seem as sincere if it were not for the clearly visible and often amateurish transparencies of playful production and fabrication (we watch the hamster ball being inflated on stage) which have remained virtually unchanged since the band first formed in 1983.

Popular Music on Film and Film on Popular Music

In the introduction to his 1999 book, Popular Music on Screen, John Mundy states he “aims to examine some important developments in the ways in which popular music has been mediated commercially, ideologically and esthetically through the screen media throughout the twentieth century, [and] to examine [...] the visual economy of popular music” (1). That this dissertation is also an attempt to examine relationships between popular music and film and that I, like Mundy, am comfortable with the “contradictions and tensions [...] connections and discontinuities” (1) inherent in such an endeavor speaks to the great underexplored breadth of the
subject of popular music and film because of how dissimilar Mundy’s project and my own actually are. Mundy’s concerns are with the history of the often tumultuous relationship between Hollywood, in which a general suspension of disbelief has embraced the persona as inauthentic performance (a role, a character, etc.), and popular music which, especially since the rise of rock music in the 1950s, has had a “defining sense of ‘authenticity’” (233). These issues have added to what Mundy calls “tensions” between Hollywood and the music industry sparked initially by Hollywood’s desire to “exploit” the new musical style in films like The Blackboard Jungle (1955), Don’t Knock The Rock (1956), and The Girl Can’t Help It (1956). Mundy elaborates on the subject of how Hollywood largely dealt with this tension:

This tension is there in the very structure of the [early rock and roll film] narrative. The insistence on placing rock’n’roll within the commercial mainstream of showbusiness, the appeal to a discourse of stardom of the kind enshrined in the classical Hollywood musical, simply cannot be resolved with the simplistic desire to exploit the popularity of the new music amongst young people. The result is an abandonment of the integrated narrative/number structure [in which classic Hollywood formulas are simply interpolated with performances by popular musical acts], and a return to the revue structure which characterized the very earliest film musicals. (110)

The utilization of rock narratives familiar to youthful audiences created the potential for acceptance as well as rejection by those audiences. On the one hand, audiences continued to purchase tickets for films starring and/or featuring the music of their favorite musicians. On the other, the probability of cultural rejection of the films on the grounds of their being too contrived and not in keeping with the projected rebellious nature of rock music ran high. Mundy’s
historical analysis explores the continually strained relationship between Hollywood’s reliance on the “story” and rock musicians’ reliance upon “authenticity” and actuality. Mundy points to particularly relevant issues regarding “authenticity” arising in the wake of punk’s influence upon commercial culture. Amidst this “paradoxical conjunction [...] the emergence of punk rock and its symbolic affront to the commercial ‘insincerities’ of the music industry” (233) coincided with what Mundy identifies as a decreasing reliance on quality and talent aided by technological advancements. Mundy believes that a far less talented and skilled musician had the ability to become a successful rock star in the 1980s than in the 1960s. No matter the identified quality of the “new batch” of musicians who rose to popularity following this “paradoxical conjunction” (Mundy points to new wavers Duran Duran as a representative group), the recording industry dealt with this shift by “recognizing and investing in new areas of opportunities within the entertainment and leisure markets” (233). This reinvestment led to a “return” to the visual media so important to the early days of rock music (though popular music has never been devoid of a visual element). It is during this “return,” in the wake of punk’s influence and the years that followed, that the four films analyzed in the following chapters of this dissertation were produced.

Ian Inglis’s 2003 reader titled Popular Music and Film is a collection of articles concerned with the marriage of commercially successful music and commercially successful film. This dissertation, by contrast, is far more concerned with commercially unsuccessful films that achieve a certain level of notoriety despite this. While dismissible on a certain level, the importance of the commercially “unsuccessful” is of the utmost importance to this project. Cultural studies scholar Kay Dickenson’s Off Key: When Film and Music Won’t Work Together is likewise interested in media and culture which has “[l]itter[ed] the path to perfection and [that
which has been] expunged from our canons and ‘best of’ lists” (14). Dickenson’s preoccupation is with the “numerous situations where music and cinema misunderstand or embarrass each other, seem utterly clueless about each other’s intentions, with one insensitively trampling upon the messages the other has so meticulously tried to articulate” (14). Elvis Presley’s 1965 film *Harum Scarum* is Dickenson’s go-to example of a music film that “just doesn’t work.”

Dickenson’s approach to the studying film and popular music—with special interest in overlooked interactions between the two media and cultures—does more than merely provide a justification for an interest in the camp, cult, or quirky. Dickenson’s scholarship also provides a superior approach to the studying of less-than-popular, less-than-professional, and less-than-“good” media. “‘Failures,’” Dickenson begins, “require our attention because they inform us of modes of working that encroach upon our everyday lives in countless ways. If we look at ‘what doesn’t work’ from a particular vantage point, its inability to do so can also contain answers” to relationships between commercial value and cultural value (15). Similarly, I hope my analyses of professional depictions of amateurism in commercially unsuccessful films may provide a “particular vantage point” from which to critique societal notions of inherent professional superiority, amateurism’s inferiority, hegemonic reliance on the judgment of success by way of commercial standards, and assumptions regarding authenticity and influence in popular music, particularly late 20th century rock music.

Notions of Authenticity in 20th Century Popular Music

The near-entirety of 20th century popular music is manufactured music devoid of “real” authenticity despite a never-ending quest in search of the “original” and for claims of authenticity. In Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor’s *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*, the authors explore this situation extensively. “A century ago, not many people
were concerned with how authentic a piece of music was; now the concern seems, at times, overwhelming. Issues of authenticity have crept into every kind of music we listen to; they’ve been ubiquitous in country, rock, and hip-hop for decades” (324). “[E]ven American Idol is haunted by questions of authenticity” (323). Barker and Taylor assert that “[t]his weird complexity between audience and performer [in which we, the audience, demand not only quality, but authentic quality] can create great songs and great rock stars” (27). While the authors claim that this demand may also, at times, actually lead to the literal death of musicians who strive for authenticity by way of self-destructive and harmful behavior (as they romantically claim was the case in the suicide of Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain) it may also lead to the metaphorical death of audience-ascribed authenticity.

Monty Python’s Eric Idle and The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band’s Neil Innis cleverly mock this quest for authenticity in a culture nearly devoid of it in *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (1978), a spoof of The Beatles’s mediated career and lives. In the film, a search for “real origins of the “Rutland sound” (the “sound” of The Rutles) brings the mockumentary’s fictional crew to an idealized New Orleans. There the narrator investigates the “authentic source” of the popular-yet-inauthentic Rutles’s music. This storyline mirrors actual accusations against actual British musicians deemed by some as popular yet inauthentic because of the cultural theft of authentic African-American folk music. When the initial interviewee, a “believably authentic” African-American musician, informs the narrator that he learned the music from Rutles records, the narrator is upset and unsatisfied. This leads him to Ruttling Orange Peel, an *even more* believably authentic African American blues musician.

RUTTLING ORANGE PEEL. Yes, sir. I originated The Rutles. They got it all from me. Every single bit of it.
NARRATOR. Well, how do you mean?

RUTTLING. Well, Sir. They come here and they took everything I ever written.

Those four guys from Liverpool came here.

MRS. PEEL (RUTTLING’S WIFE). He’s lying.

RUTTLING. I ain’t lying.

MRS. PEEL. He’s always lying!

RUTTLING. I ain’t lying!

MRS. PEEL. Every time there’s a documentary on white music around here he claims he started it all.

RUTTLING. I did, I did, I did!

MRS. PEEL. Last week, he claimed he started Everly Brothers, Frank Sinatra and Lawrence Welk. He’s always lying!

In this situation, the assumed authenticity of Ruttling is potentially more problematic than neglecting to pursue the quest for authenticity in the first place: the proverbial line between recognizing African American influences and origins in music created by white, British musicians and assuming authenticity based solely on a person’s perceived similarities to the imagined authentic folk community.

Popular music scholar Theodore Gracyk explains a form of oral folk tradition continues to exist in modern music, but one based on a mediated and “phonographically dispersed” tradition. “Earlier generations of popular musicians learned their techniques directly and personally from their predecessors” (29). He characterizes this older oral tradition as one in which “[a]ll sorts of contingencies prompt performers to introduce variations into the tradition, constantly updating it [...] the oral tradition continually obliterates the past: constantly erasing the
distinction between original and imitation” (29). Gracyk asserts that the new form of oral tradition may act the same way, but does so without the erasure of the past simply because there always exists a record of it. The “frozen past” is always present and therefore can always be used to make claims of authenticity. “[Modern popular] musicians become acquainted with music by listening to it [on the radio, albums, the Internet, etc.] rather than by reading a score” (29). This marks popular music as a form of oral tradition rather than a formal, literate “classical” tradition. But, unlike the traditional folk tradition of hearing and seeing a musician play at the same time, in person, the modern musician’s “education” initially comes from records, films, television, and other commercial media. While dismissible as inauthentic by traditional standards, when judged by its own, mediated culture’s “folk tradition” is authentically consumed only by way of interaction with “stuff.” The performance, that which may create the next piece of media, is learned by way of a consumption of and interaction with an archive of media.

The “stuff” (records, films, CDs, tapes, t-shirts, dolls, buttons, and television)—no matter how “inauthentic,” “manufactured,” “contrived,” “corporate,” or “commercial”—is the source of great and dear influence, authority, and importance. In her study of the romance novel, Janice Radway states, “[p]rint functions as a kind of material with which and upon which readers operate in order to produce meaning. [...] [D]ifferent readers read differently because they belong to what are known as various interpretive communities” (468). Whether the reader is creating meaning in the sense of active consumption, explored extensively by Stuart Hall, or is creating subsequent media and culture, the act of consuming cultural products—whether these products are of commercial material origin, folk tradition, or (more probably) some hybrid of the two—is a prerequisite. Listening to music and consuming the cultural and commercial products of popular music is important to the subsequent creation of music and music culture.
Recalling her introduction to punk music, Bikini Kill founder and co-architect of the Riot Grrrl movement Kathleen Hanna seems to convey a narrative incongruent with standard notions of rock authenticity. She was not introduced to punk through the gritty urban locales of the nearby Washington D.C. scene, which, during her formative years, featured many highly regarded and “authentic” postpunk and hardcore bands like Minor Threat and Bad Brains. Rather, she came to first learn of punk by way of the tools and products of commercial media.

When I was growing up, I didn’t have access to fanzines. I didn’t know about punk. Growing up in DC, it seemed like most of the people who were into punk were private-school people. The public school kids had no fucking idea—we had feathered hair and listened to Molly Hatchet. I can’t change the fact that I didn’t have access to it, so I don’t want to be an asshole by saying, ‘You heard about it though Rolling Stone, so you’re not really blah blah blah.’ [USA Network’s late night program Night Flight is] how I learned about punk. That was one of my main influences when I was younger. I didn’t do anything about it for years, but I knew it was there and just knowing it was there made my life a little easier.

(quoted in Sink 66-7)

Hanna’s access to punk by way of late night basic cable could seem far-from-authentic. It seems too connected with entities such as commercial television, inauthentic narratives of fictional film as opposed to the real punk of actual subcultures, and too removed from the situated communities imagined by subcultures. But when viewed in concert with Hanna’s own presented public persona—a shameless user of media and outspoken critic of the dangers of media-presented personae—her “punk rock birth” in front of a television, watching films deemed too bad, too noncommercial, or too weird for mainstream culture, makes sense. In fact, her own
Riot Grrrl movement is, as discussed in the next chapter, a realization of sorts of the fictional Corrine Burns's filmic revolution in *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*.

**Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Four Films**

The films discussed in the following chapters were ultimately chosen because they represent four very different and particular levels of professional production, commercial success, and cultural influence and cult following. All deal primarily with narratives of amateur musicians struggling to make it against “insurmountable commercial odds” resulting from the artist’s gender, talent, ability, or identity. None of the films were large-scale commercial successes by any stretch of the imagination, though one was deemed a colossal failure while another was considered a relative success. Two of the films were mainstream professional Hollywood productions with all the professional accoutrements that go along with that. The other two films were independent productions, even though one film was amateurishly created in Kentucky while driving around in a couple of vans, and the other was a financed realization of an already successful Off Broadway production. *Ishtar* has garnered more than a few laughs when I answer the “what’s your dissertation about?” question from colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. Usually something akin to, “really, isn’t that like the worst movie ever?” follows. Interestingly, few remember having seen the film, but *all* remember the media hype concerning its “flop.”

These films are interesting celluloid snapshots of their respective eras and the scenes surrounding their creation and production. *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* conveys a filmic world in which has-beens of the past (psychedelic rockers of the 1960s and punks of the 1970s) interact with a changing industry in the pre-dawn hours of MTV. *Ishtar* was made during the final years of the Reagan administration during which the climate of popular music, created
in part by MTV, may have seemed to be in stark contrast to norms of the past held dear by established entities of the music industry like the characters’ beloved Simon & Garfunkel. In the early 1990s, it seemed the music industry became collectively interested in independent media and music. Major record labels bought up entire catalogs, rosters, and even local scenes. Made in one such local scene that narrowly evaded (for better or worse) large-scale commercial encroachment on the level of Seattle’s much-fabled grunge scene, *Half-Cocked* is, by its creators’ own understanding, more a factual picture of Louisville, KY in 1994 than if it were a documentary. Essential to my purposes here, they claim the film to be a more “authentic” picture of the scene because it was completely fictional. Finally, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is very much a playful postmodern pastiche of late 1990s independent cinema, independent music, and music indicative of gay culture and the arts in New York City.

In all the films, I analyze the characters with respect to their created filmic narratives. It is my claim that the narratives all possess a certain degree of authenticity despite the fact that they are fictional. In one respect, devoid of need for nostalgia or arrogance to drive the narrative, and with a concern primarily for the story, the fictional narrative may seem more authoritative, authentic, or actual because it is focused on particulars of a more experiential and even anecdotal nature. Rather than as a path towards “superstardom” (as is the case with most *actual* amateur musician narratives found in professional documentaries or celebrity bio-pics), fictional narratives, simply because they are *stories*, can be more centered on the specifics of the liminal space without destined or inherent “positive” and commercially successful resolution.

In addition to narrative analysis, the films are all analyzed with regard to their production, distribution, and consumption. Websites, online communities, forums, tributes, and homages are explored in an attempt to relate the lasting, often more cultural than commercial, success of these
films, their cultural cachet, influence, and longevity. I am attempting to bridge the fields of
visual culture (specifically film studies) and popular music studies using as my building material
tools of cultural studies and qualitative communication criticism including, but not limited to,
critical gender and sexual orientation analysis; industry, production, reception, and commercial
analysis; and in-depth narrative analysis in hopes of exploring several facets of each of the
following four seemingly unrelated films. It is my hope that by doing so, I will add to the
conversation that is modern cultural studies.

*Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* was produced in 1981, scheduled for a
1981/1982 release, but tested poorly and remained virtually unreleased until 2008. I focus on
often-contradictory messages contained in the film. It is my claim that in writing the film, Nancy
Dowd presented the fictional Stains as commentary on not only the place of women in popular
music (and punk in particular), but also on hegemonic gender inequalities in the film industry
and American society in general. Ironically, the reality of the production emulated the fiction of
the film as Dowd was the victim of sexual harassment and made to feel unwelcome on the set,
causing her to leave the production prior to its completion, and to leave Hollywood following the
film’s lack of release. Despite director Lou Adler’s attempts to reinvigorate the film’s relevance
by adding a *commercially successful* ending (complete with a weak allusion to the brand new
MTV) to replace Dowd’s *emotionally successful* ending, the film failed. While the film remained
commercially unavailable for decades, it was made available by way of underground trading and
“alternative distribution” methods.

*Ishtar*, a 1987 film that has become synonymous with the phrase “Hollywood flop,” is
actually a hugely entertaining film with relevant commentary on East-West identity in the Cold
War era, the role of extra-musical influence contributing to perceived success/failure and quality
of product, and the space of semiprofessional and amateur performance (specifically how terrible it is to perform in a restaurant during the dinner rush). Like _Ladies and Gentlemen, Ishtar_ was also written by a sadly underappreciated woman, Elaine May, who also directed the film. Like Dowd’s relationship with the previous film, _Ishtar_ would be May’s final Hollywood endeavor (at least as a publicly visible director) and can be viewed as biting commentary on May’s Hollywood experience, despite the fact that it has only one female lead (Isabelle Adjani) and her story does not factor into the musical aspects of the plot. _Ishtar_ was commercially quashed and critically panned to such an extreme that some (including May) speculate the film was internally and purposefully sabotaged to make examples of its director and stars (Nichols).

In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, the project shifts away from major studio-produced film to focus on the extremely low budget film _Half-Cocked_. _Half-Cocked_ is, like the previous two films, centered upon the space of amateur and semiprofessional musical performance. Unlike the previous two films, _Half-Cocked_ was created by a cast and crew of people with only a minimal disconnect between them, their fictional creations, and actual semiprofessional, amateur, and professional musical experience. Nearly everyone involved with the production of the film was, at the time of its filming, primarily a musician. Though actual musical personae (a rock journalist, members of established bands, prolific songwriters) factor into the potential for perceived authenticity in all the discussed films, _Half-Cocked_ is entirely reliant upon the musicians present on screen and behind the cameras. Once again, gender is a point of analysis—the film stars indie rock musician Tara Jane O’Neill (performing under the pseudonym “Rhonda”) and was directed by progressive feminist film director Suki Hawley—but, more relevant to the surrounding project is the commentary on the role of talent (like _Ishtar_) and the distinction between not being a musician and being a musician (like _Ladies and_
Gentlemen). Much like the previous two films, the story of *Half-Cocked* becomes more interesting and relevant to a study of the presentation and reception of fictional amateur musicians in film following its final credits. So much of what makes *Half-Cocked* an important film, especially in regards to its cultural and temporal position, is its production and distribution methods, both of which mimicked independent rock tours more than Hollywood productions.

Finally, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is the focus of the fifth chapter. The story of a transgendered retro-glam musician from East Berlin who trails behind the larger professional tour of her former protégé by playing a chain of seafood restaurants, the film is an adaptation of an Off Broadway production created by musician Stephen Trask and actor John Cameron Mitchell. The duo workshopped as the fictional band, performing in New York’s notoriously critical drag community, and creating the narratives of Hedwig’s fantastic journey, his relationship with the Velvet Underground to his Warhol (Tommy Gnosis), and brash wit parodying the over-the-top space of musical, theatrical, and media performance. After its initial Off Broadway run, a film version was created. The film was a critical success and the darling of the festival circuit, but was not a commercial success. But the collective culture of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (the play, film, soundtrack, music, performance) has experienced an enormous and lasting impact. Bands perform *The Angry Inch*’s music as if they were covering a “real” band. A tribute album of “real” musicians covering the music by the fictional band raised money for the Harvey Milk School (*Wig In a Box*). Authorized and unauthorized troupes perform the music, the play, the film, or some combination thereof.

It is my intention that this project will not only explore four under-examined films, but also that it may begin to inform an understanding of amateurism, specifically in regards to the production and consumption of popular music. While some see the Internet as giving birth to
amateur-produced media and culture, it has merely increased access to media and culture that has long been available to those who sought it. The “indie underground” as identified by media outlets has long existed. When, after punk’s rise in popularity, interest in the amateur began to increase, the musical amateur narrative too gained in interest. The 1980s and 1990s’ interest in amateur and semiprofessional music and music making may not have directly influenced the development of the Internet as an outlet for, as Keen stated, culture and media being emitted from “every orifice,” but an “indie music underground” was already existent and ready to take advantage of the cultural, technological, and media-related advancements in sound reproduction and distribution it offered (similar processes in previous decades involving a potent combination of innovations in culture and technology contributed to the rise of jazz, rock and roll, punk, hip-hop, etc.). The amateur thus was ready to use the Internet to achieve something akin to what was before a desired narrative of fictional film: authentic success and accomplishment without “selling out” to commercial powers.
CHAPTER I. INAUTHENTIC SUCCESS.AUTHENTIC OBSCURITY: LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE FABULOUS STAINS

This chapter’s project pertains to commercially released films featuring fictional accounts of amateur musicians and how these narratives reflect and act as metaphor for commentary of social and commercial marginalization. The films further act as representations of the relationship between narratives critical of commercial apparatuses and the firmly commercial venture of their production and distribution. Finally, the films are indicative of cross-media relationships, specifically between fictional narratives, as depicted in these “cult-like” films, and the influenced actual, in many cases an influenced and inspired amateur musician similar in some aspect to the fictional depiction. *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* strays from this rather simplified description in one very important aspect: it, unlike the other three films of primary focus, was never actually released in an orthodox manner. At least, it was not released when I began writing this chapter. Shelved soon after its *extremely* limited theatrical release and despite numerous claims of it *finally* being released over the past several years, *Ladies and Gentlemen* seemed destined to remain unreleased. Numerous obstacles seemed to stand in its way: earlier petitions and subsequent predictions of success failed, both director and writer seemed to only agree in regards to the finished product’s failure, inclusion of potentially difficult-to-license music *may* act as hindrance, rising success of stars who seemed dismissive of the quality of the film, and quite possibly too small of a following of devotees, albeit active and vocal ones. Interestingly, its “success” was achieved *in spite* of commercial “unavailability” and its credibility may, at least in part, be reinforced because of the rather unconventional, alternative manner of its distribution.
That is not to say the film was ever unavailable. Herein lies the peculiarity of *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*. Following a premature proclamation of commercial failure, the film was pulled from commercial release, temporarily relegated to late night basic cable before being sent to the commercial wasteland of “shelving.” Despite the virtual “unavailability” of the film (outside of noncommercial and borderline-illegal methods of procurement), commercial failure, and admittedly amateurish production, the film may be one of the most important rock films of the final decades of the 20th Century, inspired the Riot Grrrl and the derivative Girl Power movements, and contains a particular snapshot of popular music at a time perfectly straddling pre-MTV and post-MTV, misogynistic hegemony and feminism, and anti-commercialism and the commercialization of anti-commercialism.

*Ladies and Gentlemen* is especially relevant to the examination of the presentation and various roles of fictional amateur musicians depicted in the professional contexts of their filmic worlds and the *actual* commercial worlds involved with the film’s distribution. As we shall see, the fictional Stains’ rise to stardom is based on traits associated with fake and dismissible *pop* and nothing that is usually celebrated in cinematic depictions of rises from obscurity to prominence. The Stains become famous simply because of (and in spite of) an exploitative media. Following “right place at the right time” events, the band is able to catapult itself and parlay a little bit of media attention in order to attain a slightly larger platform which is subsequently “fed” and made to grow larger because of further media coverage. All this is done without much substance, talent, or hard work. The situation surrounding the “real world” treatment of the film—its lack of release, legal difficulties, and cult following—seem to complement the plot of the film. Despite 11th hour editing and production attempts to make the film relevant in a changed world, the real world consumption of the film (far below the
mainstream commercial radar) seems to draw more parallels to the “original” vision of writer Nancy Dowd than the re-imagined “commercial success” ending created by director Lou Adler. The film is easily dismissible by the hegemonically male dominated fields of movie making and music making; written by a woman, “consulted” on by a feminist journalist, and featuring female musicians unheard of outside of the most progressive undergrounds of music at the time of the film’s production and attempted release. But its importance and influence have been able to thwart and sidestep commercial intervention and control. It may be worthy of the title: “the greatest film you’ve never seen.”

In this chapter, I will explore three aspects regarding Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains: the film’s plot, the production of the film, and the film’s rather unorthodox place in commercial culture. First, there are two often-complementary, often-contradictory elements at play in the film and the film’s original script. We will explore how aspects of criticisms of the music industry and mainstream media are intertwined with a pro-feminist story of female empowerment. Second, in regards to the film’s production, the film was made by a crew consisting of largely filmmaking amateurs, many of who were also music professionals including its director, Lou Adler. The musicians and Adler’s combined experience seems to have dictated a domination of an industry-centric story—an exploration of the “dregs of the music industry”—often to the detriment of writer Nancy Dowd’s script’s message of female empowerment. Lastly, the film, though not commercially released until 2008, was able to find its way into commercial culture by way of largely noncommercial methods of distribution. The cult of followers is limited but concentrated and has eerily followed a bizarre parallel to the film. Ironically, the surrounding culture of Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains mirrors more
Dowd’s original ending rather than the reedited, re-imagined ending Adler created following the rise of music television that occurred during the film’s postproduction.

*Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* is a depiction of the media’s influence in the creation of authenticity and popularity while also being a film in which the amateur narrative is used in conjunction with gender-reliant and economically marginalized characters. The film’s lack of commercial success in the dawn of the commonly criticized image-reliant MTV era creates the theoretical basis for a potential life-mimicking-art understanding of the film’s reception. As musicians hindered by gender-based and economic oppressive hegemonic forces, The Stains’s lack of talent, substance, and claims to authenticity is of a primary interest in the films’ internal analysis. But, while Adler’s ending conflates a positive success with widespread commercial success, Dowd’s original ending finds true success and happiness in cultural influence, empowerment, and community.

*All Washed Up Becomes Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*

We, the film’s audience, join the story of Corrine Burns (Diane Lane) already in progress by way of a television news magazine’s story update. Harley Dennis (Peter Donat) provides the exposition while containing a gleeful and smugly condescending smile in the opening scene of *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*. He possesses a disconnect with his subject, simultaneously signaling a social disdain for Corrine and a professional dislike for the subject of the story. “You may remember Corrine Burns. She was the high school fry chef who was fired on air in our segment on Charlestown, Pennsylvania, the town that will not die.” The scene cuts to what looks like an excerpt of a previously aired news segment of Corrine Burns proclaiming the “death” of Charlestown. Encircled by the fast food restaurant’s customers, a camera crew, and her coworkers, Corrine is fired by her boss (a pre-*Star Trek: The Next Generation* Brent
Spiner in a small uncredited role). The audience is led to believe that the presence of the camera crew—enough to provide the rather extraordinary multi-angle master shot of her dismissal from work, complete with reaction shots—did little to help Corrine’s situation, if it did not actually cause it.

“Well,” Dennis continues, “we received more mail on Corrine Burns than on any sequence we have shown in the past two years.” From the opening few minutes of the film, the depiction of the mainstream media as exploitative and opportunistic is presented. The smirk of Dennis and his classist condescension along with his amazement at the popularity of the segment on Burns paints the picture that ratings and not a humanistic concern are at play.

The news program returns to Charlestown, Pennsylvania. This time, Dennis sits face to face with Corrine in her home. We learn that Burns grew up largely fatherless (her father a possible Vietnam War casualty), has just lost her mother to lung cancer (despite this, the teenaged Corrine is a cigarette smoker), and is on the verge of losing her home. Burns is visibly frustrated with the judgmental and prying questions being delivered by Dennis and projects a general air of youthful insolence towards him and the camera. Rather than engaging in the interview, Corrine concentrates more intently upon the application of bright red eye makeup. The make-up is applied in an exaggerated manner that physicalizes her social malapertness. Dejected and already clearly presented as socially and economically unequal to Dennis and his imagined audience demographic, Corrine’s application of unorthodox makeup at an unorthodox time (during the interview) furthers her marginalization, but by her own manipulation. On her own terms, she “punks” it up for the camera.

The frustrated reporter inquires, “You’re unemployed, broke, and cynical. […] Corrine Burns, what are you going to do?”

A smirking Corrine stares proudly to the left of the camera (presumably at Dennis) with winged, bright red eye make-up now fully applied. The image rings of discontent and a (pun intended) cocksure attitude. Despite her projected strength, she is in full celebration of her specifically *youthfully* impetuous rebelliousness. She is not attempting to “man up” for Dennis or act “beyond her years,” she is in full celebration of both her femininity and her youthfulness. If a punk attitude is the cornerstone of the punk aesthetic, the images of Corrine Burns as “Third Degree” Burns, the on-the-spot introduction of The Stains, and the unbridled distrust of the status quo—especially when delivered by way of an exploitation and manipulation of the exploitative and manipulative tools of the status quo—is as punk as it gets. These qualities will prove to be far superior to musical talent, practice, and refinement. Because, as we learn, The Stains barely exist as a band. But even if The Stains did not exist before the interview with Dennis, they undeniably came into being with their mere mention. Using the media as a tool of opposition and rebellion rather than passive hegemonic reinforcement, Corrine announces her presence, not as an object to be pitied, but as a someone feared and possibly celebrated.

The Fabulous Stains are, in essence, not actually a band yet (as of the time of the interview), but capitalizing upon the media coverage to introduce the sisters (Corrine and Tracy) and their cousin (Jessica) as a musical band rather than three poor objectified members of the socially marginalized, they are able to exploit the less-than-sincere media coverage as a way to
become a band. They are members of the disaffected and rebellious youth so intertwined socially and culturally with rock and roll (and punk rock in particular). Their lack of musical ability, experience, and “product,” does not hinder them from becoming a band. And despite what will eventually lead to the attempted (or actual, depending on your reading of the film’s ending) cultural dethronement of The Stains by the minions of followers they accrue by way of further media coverage, their lack of substance is of little consequence to their initial success, following, and performance. It turns out, the exposure and a “right place at the right time” situation, coupled with enough marketability, will catapult the three nascent musicians into not only a professional arena, but past both a washed-up group of has-beens with a dead guitarist and an opening-act-turned-headliner punk band from England.

Following the interview (possibly the following evening), Corrine, Tracy, and Jessica attend a low-budget concert in a run down theater/club. The show is a part of a traveling tour featuring two bands: a relatively up-and-coming British band, The Looters, opening and an “all washed up” has-been American band, The Metal Corpses, headlining the show. Prior to The Looters’s set, gaggles of clean and barely-disaffected youth dance to passive pop, while the more subversive attendees (drug users, pregnant teenagers, etc.) congregate elsewhere. When The Looters take the stage, all attendees are drawn to the front of the stage. Couples cease to dance together and singularly bounce, gyrate, and stare at the foreigners on stage. In a stereotypical “punk” manner, singer Billy (Ray Winstone) announces his disgust for the band’s geographic location (“Where the fuck are we?”) before launching into their opening song. Corrine makes her way to the front of the stage as if entranced by the music, the band, the style, and the attitude. She stands in front of the Looters, fixated upon them as others—some equally enamored, some mindlessly pogoing along—surround her. Tracy and Jessica come to find themselves under The
Looters’s spell as well. This, it seems, is the introduction to punk for the youthful denizens of this rural Pennsylvania town.

A complete 180-degree turn occurs when, following The Looters’s opening set, The Metal Corpses take to the stage. Unlike the rather low production of The Looters—whose set features little to no visual or aesthetic manipulation of lighting or “show”—the Corpses’s opening number features a long spoken introduction, silhouetted by a singular backlight. The largely youthful audience is visibly horrified by the gross display of age and general out-of-touch-ness of these has-beens. Only a single fan—seemingly a leftover groupie from the band’s heyday in the 1960s—is reacting positively to the band. Lead singer Lou (The Tubes’s Fee Waybill) attempts to build the suspense for their opening number:

Alright, let’s boogie. Anybody out there got a roadmap? Yeah, you know what’s comin’, dontcha? I haven’t done this song for a couple of years because, uh, I didn’t want to rest on my laurels… about five million of ‘em. This song was number one for seven weeks in a row. You keep asking for it and we’re up here to make you happy so what are we gonna do?

The audience is silent to Lou’s “triumphant” introduction save for the one interactive fan who answers “Roadmap of my Tears,” the title of The Metal Corpses’s “five million” seller. Billy heckles the band from off-stage (“you bunch of old farts”). The band launches into a pedestrian, wanna-be anthem in the vein of equally “inauthentic” 1970s glamrockers KISS. Likewise, Lou dons make-up similar to the more amateurish make-up worn by the members of KISS when they first formed a band called Wicked Lester. Upon the face of Lou, the make-up reads less as an amateurish attempt at professional theatrics and “show” and more as a desperate grasp to
relevance. He is a laughingstock to both the audience and The Looters. Only the sole interactive fan is “supportive” of Lou Corpse. She will soon be Lou’s “groupie” as well.

The Metal Corpses are clearly unhappy with the presence of The Looters and members of The Looters vocally return the sentiment. The tour is a failure. The bands are mismatched. The tour’s stops are less-than-ideal. The Looters’s agent, Dave Robell (David Clennon) is disconnected. Billy’s only apparent contact with him is via telephone calls to a bar. No matter his distance, he is presented as equally inept. Lawnboy (reggae vocalist Barry Ford) is an ill-qualified tour manager, unable to juggle corralling the infighting, the rigors of the tour, and the piloting of the overstuffed tour bus. Though the tour seems to be in its earliest stages, it seems already to be collapsing by the time it rolls into Charlestown.

Following the show, a timid Corrine—out of make-up and her confident “Third Degree” Burns persona—approaches Billy in search of advice, mentorship, and inspiration. He is disinterested. He grabs his oversized boom box and leaves. A dejected Corrine turns to find an elated tour manager. Lawnboy recognizes Corrine (“Yeah, The Stains!”) from the television program and offers the band an opening spot on the tour without hearing a note. With “no future” and no promise of economic advancement in the “dead” town of Charlestown, the girls join the “tour of the whole country” for a “percentage of the profits” the following day. Walking to the tour bus, Corrine, Jessica, and Tracy remind one another that they’ve only had three rehearsals. But they were “real long ones,” Corrine encouragingly offers. No matter their lack of experience, talent, or material, the joining of the tour, despite their largely unwelcome presence, is a foreseeable escape. Rock and roll is their only escape even if they don’t really know how to rock and/or roll yet. Likewise, the tour is in such a state of virtual failure that the addition of a band
with any media recognition can surely only help the tour. Both Corrine and Lawnboy are mutually exploiting one another’s resources in order to aid themselves.

In 2006, Diane Lane, in interview with Fresh Air’s Terry Gross, is asked to chose a “not as well known film” Lane is particularly fond of. “You’re gonna ask me to choose one?” Lane questions, “It was called All Washed Up… for years. Which, I made jokes saying: ‘which I will be [all washed up] when it comes out.’” Lane was fifteen years old at the time of the film’s initial production. Laura Dern was twelve. Neither actress, both of whom would go on to have long and lucrative careers in Hollywood, was a seasoned professional at the time of the film’s production. Likewise, Marin Kanter, who has since largely left public life, was also a rather inexperienced actress despite being five years older than Lane. Dern and Lane had both only done a handful of films and television prior to Ladies and Gentlemen; Kanter was making her film debut. Laura Dern’s parents forbade her from doing the film. Rather than heeding their advice, Dern sued them for emancipation, won, and traveled to Vancouver to join the production (Jacobson and Green).

In addition to having little acting experience between them, they also had very little musical experience. In the interview with Gross, Lane acknowledges that they did their own singing.

We were supposed to suck […] we were supposed to be awful and lousy. […] The director caught us rehearsing in our room and had an absolute fit. I said, “Are you worried about the fact that we’re gonna actually get good, here?” We’re fifteen. We can be bad on purpose. […] We will act like we’re lousy, but let us at least see if we can hit the notes. It was a great […] spoof of the really low, low, low ends of the rock and roll industry.
It seems that Diane Lane’s primarily memory of the production of the film rests upon her singing. “I can’t sing, I suck,” Lane told Sarah Jacobson in her documentary of *Ladies and Gentlemen*, several years before the *Fresh Air* interview, “[The Stains are] supposed to suck so maybe I can do that.”

When The Stains first take to the stage, they do, in fact suck. But it is not long before the fact that cannot play is barely recognizable as a hindrance to their success, in spite of the members of the other bands whose tour they “invade.” In one respect, they challenge the very nature of musical ability by—on their own terms and “authentically” built upon their lack of traditional musical ability—redefining what it is to make music. The Stains *can* play in the sense that they *do* play their instruments despite their lack of training, talent, and ability, The fact that much of the filmic music we hear as performed by The Stains was actually produced by three nonmusicians is cause for celebration. Furthermore, as will become a central criticism of The Stains’s ability as waged by men in the film, the fact that they are young *and* female is seen as a “natural” hindrance to them truly rocking like a man. Because, whereas the disparagement that one *cannot* play is more a valuing of the quality of the music being produced, the “fact” that “girls can’t rock” is largely seen as a “natural” fact of life.

In *Rockin’ Out of the Box: Gender Maneuvering in Alternative Hard Rock*, Sociologist Mimi Schippers notes that despite the association between rock music and youthful rebellion and its penchant for it “consistently defin[ing] itself in opposition to mainstream, middle-class values” (20) including sexual repression, the culture surrounding rock music has done little to challenge notions of hegemonic male domination. In other words, it may act as a tool to celebrate sexuality, but traditionally only for men. She continues:
Despite [the] proclivity for men dressing in drag; despite its sacred place in my [Schippers] own life and the lives of thousands of other girls as a release from the secluded tower of adolescent, feminine sexuality; and despite rockers’ claims that it was oppositional to mainstream sexual values, rock music has always been steeped in hegemonic construction of sexuality and gender. With few exceptions, rockers simply did it louder and with more attitude than others while shrouding themselves in the ostensibly countercultural stance of antirepression. As Michel Foucault has noted, mocking and flouting sexual repression is not necessarily an oppositional approach to sexuality. (21)

On their way to their first gig as a part of the tour, Corrine, Tracy, and Jessica unpack their seemingly tour-provided performance attire. “Neat,” Jessica exclaims too loudly for Tracy’s comfort, “I wonder if we get to keep these.” Though we do not get a good view of the clothing at this time, leather pant legs (or sleeves, perhaps) are viewable. As Jessica discovers that that the on-bus bathroom contains no toilet paper, it becomes clear that the tour did not plan on a having long-term female occupants (outside of temporary groupies) and, if The Stains are welcome at all on the bus or on the tour—which, it seems, they are not—they are welcomed only as sexual objects. This is made all the more problematic when considering the age of the girls—all far below the legal age of consent. Around them, the “boys’ club” of the tour is visibly shaken by their presence. Likewise, the sheltered Corrine, Tracy, and Jessica are out of their element on the bus. Jessica is naively enthusiastic. Tracy doubts the validity of the situation. Corrine toughens up and remains under the protection of her “Third Degree” Burns persona.

Just as the tour seems ill-prepared to bring on the proto-Riot Grrrls of The Stains, it may also be ill-prepared for the differences between the once-popular Metal Corpses and the anti-
commercial-as-political-statement Looters. Indicative of the disconnect between the old guard, as represented by Lou Corpse’s philosophically nostalgic rants, and the newer, more progressive Looters, is Lou’s on-bus complaints. He is clearly delusional or protectively projecting a false bravado. The presence of anyone surrounding him on the bus is, in his opinion, either as a supporter of his music (his band), sexual outlet (groupies), or administrative and managerial support (Lawnboy). The Looters serve him minimal and expendable purpose. The Stains also serve him the purpose as potential and expendable groupies if we agree with Schippers, who states that “[b]ecause groupie [italics original to text] is constructed as anyone to whom a rock musicians might potentially gain sexual access, all women involved with rock music are potential groupies” (27). Out of disgust, he resorts to target the “useless” residents of the bus as recipients of his experience via a lecture. First directed at no one in particular, it becomes clear that Lou’s speech is aimed at (or is in regards to) Looters’s vocalist, Billy, as retaliation for the previous evening’s off-stage heckling. Looking around at the leather-clad punkers in seats near him, he begins:

You know none of this shit is new, man. I wore leathers back in 1964, man.

Before anybody was doing it. I started the whole thing. I had my little rockabilly period, you know… glitter… but, finally, all it ever comes down to, I mean, the thing that separates the men from the boys, is that if you’re not yourself, you’re nobody. You know what I’m saying? I mean you take this rookie asshole jumps on the stage and shouts at the audience. I mean, where’s that at, man? [Affecting a British accent] ‘Do you want to be a professional?’ I mean, honey, there’s nothing new.
Billy takes the lecture none-too-kindly, attacking him with Lawnboy’s can opener. Lawnboy, the tour’s only resident optimist and pacifist, screeches the bus and the quarrel to a halt.

When the bus arrives at the first stop on the tour with The Stains in tow, each faction follows a separate, but connected path of dealing with the less-than-ideal situations before the gig at a venue called The Penthouse. The Looters argue amongst themselves while setting up their equipment. The tour, it seems, was a far more enticing proposition when it was just a thought. Now, in reality, preparing to perform their second gig in rural Pennsylvania, the promise of a “tour across the country” and “sunny California” seem more like a dream than before. Lou Corpse buys cocaine from a dealer hanging out during sound checks. Lou halfheartedly tells him how good the tour is, about the band’s recent single (“Princess”), and about how their career in general is going well. Disturbed at the cost of the cocaine, he asks the Corpses’s guitar Jerry Jervey (Vince Welnick) to split it with him. He silently agrees.

Jessica and Tracy, now dressed in their tight-fitting leather catsuits, practice (without instruments in hand) in a full-length mirror. Corrine protests to a passing Lawnboy. She will not, she tells him, wear this. Lawnboy, delivering a gem of dime-store philosophy, tells them, “Everyone wants to go to Heaven, but no one wants to die.” Unconvinced, Corrine rolls her eyes. She sees no benefits to another lecture. As Lawnboy introduced the band (“Alright, you’ve seen her on national TV, an independent young lady, not afraid to speak her mind, the fantastic Stains”) we see that Jessica and Tracy are fully committed to the outfits, seeing nothing degrading or wrong with them. Corrine, arriving late to the side of the stage, is dressed in a trench coat and oversized red beret. Turning the tables on Corrine’s rather un-punk appearance, the other two ask, “What are you wearing?”
The Stains take to the stage. Corrine walks to the microphone at center stage. In the lights of the stage, we can see that she has an even more over-the-top application of make-up than in the TV interview. The band is at a disadvantage from the onset in that it is an “incomplete” band; they have no drummer. In a different situation, a different culture, and in preparation to play a different kind of music, the lack of a drummer would be of little importance. But here, as the opening act for the hyper-masculine Looters and the over-produced Corpses, the already out-of-place young female band is made even more “naked” without a proper rock and roll rhythm section. The crowd, unlike the Charlestown crowd, appears much older. They sit at tables and order alcoholic beverages from wait staff rather than crowding on a dance floor and handing off drugs in the bathroom. To say that Corrine appears awkward is an understatement. She seems unprepared, but may actually be overly prepared.

The band opens with a song called “Waste of Time.” Following a screech of feedback (the classic filmic tool of under-prepared stage performance), over a simplistic and repeated two-chord vamp, a Shaggs-like song slowly begins.

You ask me questions / And I say nothing
I give you answers / And I say nothing
I’m a waste of time / I’m a waste of time
Look at your paycheck / You’ve worked so hard, where’s it all goin’?
To jerks like me who spend it on nothin’
I’m a waste of time / I’m a waste of time
I’m a waste of time / Don’t call me
I’m a waste of time / Don’t ask me
I’m a waste of time / Don’t touch me
Jessica ends the song prematurely with a forceful strike of her bass. She leaves the stage, rejected by the jeering crowd. Tracy follows.

Upon the song’s meandering beginnings, Looters’ bassist Johnny (The Clash’s Paul Simonon) leans over to Billy at the bar, “They can’t play.” Billy replies, “Girls can’t be rock and rollers, it’s a fact of life.” After Jessica’s departure, Billy says, “See?”

Corrine is left standing alone on the stage. Still self-consciously dwarfed within her trench coat and hiding beneath her hat, she stares out at a judgmental and giggling crowd. Corrine removes her hat to reveal a hairdo as “punk” as her make-up: a skunk-like dye job similar, but far tamer in comparison, to the famed punk rock coiffure of Soo Catwoman.

Immediately, the crowd emotionally splits along lines of gender and age. The younger and/or more female the audience member, the more sentiments of “cool” are verbalized. Some in the audience touch their own heads, imagining Corrine’s radical styling applied to their own hair. Others judgmentally express a “geez,” aghast at the sight of Corrine on stage. Billy, staring at the stage from the bar, announces to Johnny that now he likes her.

“You don’t fool me for a minute, I know all about you,” Corrine barks. It seems that she is directing her accusations towards a very 1970s-looking, mustachioed gentleman in the front row. It soon becomes clear that she is speaking not to him, but to his date. “You came here tonight thinking you’d see some cute and wonderful rock star. And you hoped he’d take one look at you from up on the stage and he’d fall in love with you just like that.” The uncomfortable woman in front of the stage mutters to her date, “Is she on drugs?” Corrine, bandless and alone, now directs her attention to all the women of the audience, much to the dismay of all the men in the crowd.
You can be different from all the other girls. Suckers! Be yourselves. These guys laugh at you. They’ve got such big plans for the world, but they don’t include us. So what does that make you? Just another girl lining up to die.

With that, the mustachioed gentleman in the front row tosses his drink at Corrine, hitting her trench-coated arm. The crowd applauds largely in approval for his halting of Corrine’s rant. Watching from off stage, Jessica and Tracy mutter, “shit,” seeing their adventure coming to an imminent ending. Rather than cowering off stage in tears, Corrine removes her trench coat to reveal the entirely of her style. To misogynistic whistles and applause, Corrine now stands center stage in a see-through blouse, a pair of pantyhose, and a black bikini bottom. What is a display of sexuality for members of the crowd is an act of rebellion for Corrine. She stands, punking-up a sexually explicit outfit which, viewed against a backdrop of Corrine’s attitude, hairstyle, and The Stains’s music, is a strong statement of feminist reappropriation. She returns to the microphone, “I’m perfect. But nobody in this shithole gets me, ‘cause I don’t put out.” The Stains’s first set as a professional musical act, albeit in the lowest level of professionalism, has come to an end after only a portion of an incomplete song, but it has come to an end with such a powerful act of feminist protest and sentiment that, for a small portion of the crowd, The Stains’s position has been concreted.

When The Stains return to the relative safety of backstage they find members of the other bands staring in at The Metal Corpses’s guitarist dead on the toilet. He has overdosed on the cocaine Lou and he purchased earlier in the day. Without him, The Corpses’s portion of the tour has come to an end. Without The Metal Corpses, The Looters have moved up to headline the rest of the tour. Once again, Billy calls the geographically removed manager in a bar “somewhere” to tell him of the news of the Corpses’s guitarist’s passing and to inform him that The Looters need
a “good rock and roll band” as a supporting band. Billy wants The Stains off of what is now his tour. Back on the bus, Billy attempts to formulate some sort of relationship with Corrine. Billy’s sincerity is unclear. Does he see in Corrine a potential sexual conquest or is he sincerely moved by her “performance?” Despite requesting a new opener to replace the band, he tells Corrine that he likes her hair. Corrine asks him what else he likes, looking for confrontation from the thus far unsupportive Billy. In a manner of exposing her lack of substance, Billy answers, “That’s it. At the moment, you’re just hair, aintcha? If you work hard, maybe, in a couple of years’ time, you might be something different. At the moment, you’re just two white stripes, aintcha?” Corrine pantomimes a yawn of disagreement.

In a news story covering the death of the guitarist, Jervey is incorrectly identified as the group’s bass guitarist, although the voiceover is occurring over images taken directly from early scenes in the film of him playing guitar. A humorous recap of Jervey’s career follows: one of the “pioneers of acid rock” with seven drug arrests, two convictions, five paternity suits, fifteen bands, and a “meteoric twenty year career.” Newscaster Alicia Meeker introduces the person who, prior to the coroner’s report that it was a cocaine overdose, was the “prime suspect” in Jervey’s death: Corrine Burns.

Meeker asks Corrine if she was Jervey’s girlfriend. Corrine, having received a crash course in “media shrewdness” from Dennis, asks if this is for TV. Meeker informs her that they have the “largest audience in the tri-state area” and that she gets “a lot of her stuff on network.” Though Meeker may simply be boasting in order to coax a non-Industry “lummox” into giving her what she needs (a worthwhile sound bite), Corrine, a now-seasoned expert on media manipulation, “admits” that Jervey was in love with her. Tracy is brought in to the fold adding that he sent her “flowers and turquoise jewelry.” Meeker eats it up. Corrine tells Meeker that she
had to set him straight since she “don’t put out.” “In that outfit?” Meeker responds, nodding towards Corrine’s clothing. “It doesn’t make sense to wear a see-through blouse and no bra and say, ‘I don’t put out.’” Corrine corrects Meeker, “That’s not what it means.” Corrine tells Meeker that Jervey was unfit for her and her world. “He was an old man in a young girl’s world.”

Meeker’s co-host, Stu McGraff, laughing off the report in much the same manner that Dennis laughed off his reporting on Corrine’s plight, comments on the trite nature of the story. “This guy [Jervey] could probably have had his pick of any number of the ‘camp followers,’ and instead he falls for this really weird looking girl.” Meeker, apparently stricken by the “charms” of Corrine, states that she thinks Corrine looks very “elegant.” “Takes all kinds,” is her co-host’s reply. Meeker signs off by plugging The Stains’s gig at “The Bamboo Room at the Fairgate.”

Meeker has become the champion of The Stains or so it would seem. She too stands to benefit from the coverage. By plugging the show, she hopes to attract more likeminded young girls not for the benefit of The Stains, but because, as we discover, she intends to also attend the show to follow up on The Stains and their fans. With more attendees, she will have more subjects for her study. Although there is far less condescension in her use of Corrine (she earnestly finds her “elegant,” the first positive mediated sentiment cast upon Corrine) and far less judgmentally misogynistic in her treatment of their fans, she is still, nonetheless, exploiting them for her benefit.

As if inspired by the additional media coverage and empowered by the surplus of supportive fans in attendance, The Stains take to the stage with a highly professional demeanor. One can assume that there has been “some time” to practice a bit between their last gig and this one, since this performance of “Waste of Time,” is complete with a more competent musical
accompaniment and backing vocals. Far more polished and complete is their sound, but not at the risk of altering their “incomplete” band; the steadier meter is still achieved without a drummer. With the “benefit” of Meeker’s plugging, the crowd is now full of Stains fans that, inspired by The Stains’s presence in the broadcast of the Corpses’s tragedy, now dress like Corrine. Jessica and Tracy also now “match” Corrine. Meeker is in attendance as well. She approaches a table full of Stains followers; affectionately referred to as “Skunks” because of their aping hairstyles, telling them they “look great.” She informs them that she will be waiting outside the venue following the show for interviews. Excited “Skunks” nod.

Following the song, Corrine once again repeats the phrase “we don’t put out” as an introduction to the band as she draws attention towards her braless see-through blouse. The adult males in the audience hoot and holler as if they are watching a strip tease. The mixed messages are clearly being received in an equally mixed manner. Whereas the younger females feel empowered and liberated by the statement as a decisively nonsexual movement, the older males in the audience project an air of pedophiliac sexuality onto The Stains. When a group of Skunks stand to reveal that they too have chosen to wear see-through blouses without bras as a statement of their own “individuality” and perfection, the received message is once again divided by gender and age. Despite the increased popularity, or possibly because of the increased popularity of The Stains, The Looters continue to want them off their tour. The members of the band voice their concern to Billy who deflects the complaints towards their non-present agent. At the same time, Lawnboy, seemingly unconnected to The Looters’s agent, presents Corrine with a “standard contract” to remain on the tour.

Billy checks himself into a hotel room for the night. Amid coital relations with a hotel maid, he catches Meeker’s most current story on Corrine Burns and The Stains on the television.
It is the first time he sees The Stains on television. Meeker, in an interview with several Skunks, points out that *obviously* all the Skunks found their way to The Stains by way of *her* show. It becomes clear that, although she has presented herself and her interest in Corrine, The Stains, and her Skunks as far more humanitarian than Dennis’s original coverage, she is no better than he.

“Exploitation, that’s what it is, exploitation,” Billy announces to the television and the hotel maid sharing his bed.

Despite the potentially insincere involvement by Meeker, the Skunks continue to be attracted to Corrine and The Stains because of their perceived sincerity, as displayed in the short exchange between Meeker and a Skunk:

MEEKER. What affect did she have on you?

SKUNK. She said things that I’ve always wanted to say and I haven’t been able to.

MEEKER. What kind of things?

SKUNK. She gave her honest opinion about how she felt about people. That’s why I’m like her now.

MEEKER. And what are you?

SKUNK. I’m a Skunk.

Meeker’s co-anchor continues to display his lack of understanding. He openly and on-air doubts the potential positive media effect on the situation. Coming out of the story, he questions the validity of the situation openly. “You begin to wonder about your profession, don’t you? I mean, you give a little airtime to some nut on the big night news and twenty-four hours later you got a
bunch of other nuts just making her into a hero. When they see something on the media, they’ve got to do the same thing.”

Meeker, painfully smiling through the negative criticism, jabs back, “you’re on the box for an hour every day and I don’t see anyone trying to be like you.” They both laugh uncomfortably. Meeker continues to defend The Stains, stating that the media did little to construct them; rather they are products solely of their own creation. Meanwhile, her co-host sees them as substance-less fabrications more created by Meeker for her story than as a revolutionary social movement. A message that the young and female Stains, as well as their growing minions, could not possibly possess any sort of substance not because they lack experience or because they are not a “real” band, but because of their age and gender ring loudest to their male critics. Their lack of material (songs, etc.) and experience seems of little concern to him because even if they had a large repertoire and back catalog, it too would likely be easily dismissible because it would be the music of “media whores,” not real musicians, media personalities, or artists. While it is unlikely that the music of The Looters (or The Metal Corpses’s music) would be of a much higher level of validity in the opinion of McGrath, a similar story on a comparable male group would be a more valid news story. Despite the conflict, Meeker holds true to the ideas that Corrine, The Stains, and the Skunks are genuine and authentic; the validity of the story and her non-exploitative involvement with it; and the need to continue to plug The Stains’ next performance. Once again, she closes with an announcement of another area (apparently still in western Pennsylvania) performance.

Sparked perhaps in part by his perceived “treatment” of Corrine on television, Billy approaches Corrine on the bus to inform her that he now believes that she will be a big star. He can’t explain it, he says, he just feels it. Corrine, usually abrasive towards Billy who has never
been anything approaching cordial prior to this discussion, seems caught in a moment between her public persona (untrusting of all men) and the vulnerable young girl who was enamored with The Looters’s first performance. “I’ve been on the road for three years,” Billy tells Corrine after they pull into a parking lot, “I’ve been around. I could have any bird I want.” His interest in Corrine, he claims, in a roundabout way, is purely creative and professional; he is not attempting to “pull” her. Once again, Billy attempts to mask the complaints of the past after he coaxes Corrine to a hotel room for “room service.” “Some people think girls can’t be rock and rollers,” he tells her, “I’ve never said that in my life.”

Billy now wishes to take on the role of mentor. He tells her that they need practice and they could be “good.”

“If I wanted your advice,” Corrine tells him, “I’d ask for it.” Slowly, Corrine begins to take Billy’s advice. Despite disputing his labeling of her as a gimmick, she is accepting of his advice of how to add substance to her music. She asks about The Looters’s signature song, “Be a Professional.”

“It’s about the draft,” Billy informs her. Presenting herself as an apt pupil, Corrine asks Billy to write down the lyrics to the song so that she may benefit from his substance. Although Billy agrees to Corrine’s request, he later confesses to being illiterate. Despite aggressively thwarting Billy’s sexual advances prior to his confession, it is this moment of apparent honesty that causes Corrine to lower her guard, open the door to the bathroom in which she is preparing to bathe, and allow Billy to follow her into the shower.

The following day, an eerily cheerful Billy and Corrine walk together, presumably after spending the night together, into a warehouse where real life underground legends Black Randy and the Metrosquad are performing to an audience of one. The Looters’s agent, Dave Robell,
who thus far Billy has only communicated with via the telephone, stands in front of the stage, reading the newspaper, and approvingly nodding his head to the music. Corrine immediately smells something fishy. Billy introduces David to Corrine. David introduces Billy to The Metrosquad, stating that they are “so new” and “perfect” to open for The Looters. Billy, in a singular moment on chivalry and loyalty, tells David to get rid of Black Randy. “The Stains,” he tells David, “play ‘fore us.” His change of heart concerning needing “real Rock and Rollers” rather than The Stains may be partially informed by the now-sexual relationship between him and Corrine, but the added media exposure of The Stains (something The Looters’s agent is apparently unaware of) surely has added potential exposure for The Looters as well. Dejected by the uncovering of Billy’s earlier lack of loyalty and unimpressed by his now-apparent allegiance to The Stains, Corrine storms off.

The following gig, the Westland Cultural Festival, is in a large room, far bigger than any of the clubs or bars the tour has been to thus far. The Stains introduce themselves to room full of Skunks, hundreds of them, to roaring cheers. Before playing a note, they are stars. Corrine preaches to her congregation:

CORRINE. What’s so wonderful about getting old?

SKUNKS. Nothing!

CORRINE. What’s so wonderful about getting married?

SKUNKS. Nothing!

CORRINE. What don’t we do?

SKUNKS. Put out!

CORRINE. Do you want to be a professional?
With that, the member of The Looters, watching from offstage, come to attention. They become more irate as The Stains begin to play “Be a Professional.” They are aware not only of having their song taken from them, but also being openly mocked. For all intents and purposes, this is only the second song in their repertoire since their only other two filmic performances have been of “Waste of Time.” The audience—at least the dominating Skunks portion of the audience—erupts into a roar. Billy announces to no one in particular that he’s been betrayed. During the song’s first instrumental break, Corrine begins an awkward mimicry of Billy’s stage movements. “She’s doing a fucking better job than what you do,” says Steve (The Sex Pistols’s Steve Jones) in answer to Billy’s complaints. The Looters’s agent looks around the room approvingly.

Once again, it seems that Meeker is present at this show (despite the fact that we are under the impression that the tour has been moving westward from a Pittsburgh suburb towards California) and presents another account of the evening’s performance. For the first time, with this broadcast, the members of The Stains, along with David, see themselves on television when they walk by a store’s window display showing the program on dozens of televisions. Corrine is amazed at the sight of them on television. “It’s us,” she smiles.

In this broadcast, Meeker now seems to simultaneously celebrate The Stains and their Skunks while also exploiting the story on a level unachieved in her earlier broadcasts. In a sense, she celebrates the followers while attempting to exploit the leaders. In celebration of the Skunks, she reports:

It seems that here in “nowhereland” it has become clear to several thousand very young women. Inspired by an unrecorded rock and roll band with see-through blouses and white stripes in their hair that life is to be lived right now, not tomorrow. These young women, who call themselves Skunks, are not content to
let old age bring them the specious wisdom of despair. And in their rebellion they have clearly decided that female existence should not be a rush to the grave or worse to the supermarket. And that none of their beauty should be wasted or passed unnoticed.

Like Dennis before her, Meeker returns to Charlestown for a more in-depth report (the possible exploitative vilification) on Tracy, Jessica, and Corrine. Jessica’s mother (and Corrine and Tracy’s aunt) is interviewed by Meeker. What begins as a sort of mediated scolding directed at the media and The Stains from Jessica’s mother becomes a confession of her lack of belief in Jessica. She, like her parents before her, never had any belief that her daughter could amount to anything. She is “proud of her getting around what [she] did to her.” In essence, Jessica’s mother celebrates Jessica’s ability to break the cycle of self-imposed disempowerment.

Inspired by the broadcast—not so much the content as the amount—David’s attention and professional concerns shift away from The Looters and towards The Stains. He sees this most recent report as a catalyst for catapulting the band’s career. The start, according to David, is a “good support band.” “The Looters,” he tells her, “are killing you.” Like others’ “interest” in Corrine and The Stains, David is interested in exploiting The Stains for his own gain despite presenting himself as a “friend” of the young women.

As a test of Corrine’s loyalty, David tells her to get rid of the “Lawn Guy” (Lawnboy). Lawnboy, who had previously had The Stains sign a contract with him, is not so quick to just allow Corrine out of the contract. No matter the protests from Lawnboy or The Looters, The Stains are now the headliners. Though they have no record, David begins a marketing push, selling hair dye, 8x10s, posters, etc. at the next gig. When Billy enters the backstage area, he is
told his dressing room is down the hall; the door marked “support band.” Billy, clearly upset at the shifting of power, storms into Corrine’s private dressing room where she is “doing PR.”

CORRINE. You are so jealous of me. I’m everything you ever wanted to be.

BILLY. A cunt.

CORRINE. Exactly.

Despite David’s booking of “Mexican Randy” (Black Randy in a sombrero) as a new opening act, Corrine allows The Looters to remain on her bill in a supporting position. The Looters will perform before The Stains as a “warm-up act.”

While the members of The Stains, caught up in the excitement of the now-supportive attention of David, now emit a bravado of superiority, they have done little to “earn” their accolades. In fact, they have not really changed in the short time since they became a band, but the mediated definition of them has changed greatly. Although the timeline is vague, it can be assumed that the accelerated nature of their rise and impending fall—that which may cause some to cry “foul” at the unbelievability of *Ladies and Gentlemen*—the speed and lack of cultural or professional development which has occurred adds to both the inexperience and potential for further exploitation, dethronement, and discarding that will occur. They are no more “worthy” of the fame and attention than when they first joined the tour. The Looters attempt to perform in the hostile environment of hundreds of Skunks chanting, “We want The Stains!” Unable to perform their set properly, Billy halts the performance in a manner reminiscent of Corrine’s original preaching towards the first bar. The Looters have become the disdained. Billy addresses an audience member in the front row. “What’s your name?” he asks her. “Just call me Skunk,” she replies. He begins to “out” The Stains as inauthentic and the Skunks as their mindless followers:
You’ve been ripped off. You’ve all been ripped off. How much did you pay for that outfit? [To the crowd] She don’t want to say. I’ll tell you why she don’t want to say, ‘cause you’ve all been conned. […] You’re buying hair dye. You’re buying clothes. What’s it take to dye your hair? You’ve been had. You’ve been screwed by your hero. Where do you think all the money goes? I’ll tell you where it goes. It goes in her pocket. You haven’t got a clue. You’re adverts. You’re a commercial. I feel very, very sorry for you people.

Meanwhile, The Stains, increasingly demanding and “professional-acting,” make their way to the stage. When the loudspeaker announces “ladies and gentlemen, the fabulous Stains,” the house is silent. A confident Corrine approaches the microphone thanking the crowd for attending. Still, the house is silent. As Corrine begins to speak about “how big” The Stains had become and the situation of seeing themselves on television, mutters of discontent begin. The crowd becomes more and more unruly and unsupportive of the now exposed as inauthentic Stains. Despite chants of “bullshit,” Corrine attempts to count in “their” song “Be a Professional.” They begin the song, barely making it to the first chorus before the stage is overrun by a fan and several thrown objects. The song is brought to a complete halt when a thrown bottle of black hair dye breaks on Corrine’s head. The concert is over. Similarly, the career of The Stains appears to be over as well.

Following the concert, a dejected Corrine approaches David asking for her cut of the money from the evening. He is on the phone attempting to sell a “cousin act” called The Smears. “That was a fiasco,” David informs her. The Stains, he tells her, was just a concept and she blew the concept, so there is no money. Mimicking Billy’s earlier threat of Lawnboy, Corrine threatens David with a bottle opener.
The final newscast of the film features Meeker’s co-host, Stu McGrath, alone with Corrine:

Alicia Meeker will not moderate this interview today, as was originally scheduled. Alicia is now assigned to our network’s national bureau in Washington. We all wish her the best of luck. Our topic tonight is manipulation: fans from the inside out. Well, Corrine, I guess you’ve caught the winking eye of the media. There was this great crescendo, then “boom.” In effect, one might say, you’re a has-been.

The newscast shows near-riotous scenes from the previous night’s concert. Corrine attempts to defend herself, “If we had made any money, which we didn’t…” before being cut off by McGrath.

“Whatever you were selling—lies, truth—I don’t know, your fans certainly seem to resent it,” McGrath laughs in a manner reminiscent of, but more openly disdainful than, Dennis’s original interview with Corrine. “Well, let’s get back to our point: ‘Don’t put out.’” McGrath accuses Corrine of never actually meaning it and for putting all the young girls at risk of rape because of the “risqué outfits” she inspired. When a dejected Corrine attempts to answer him, she is told the newscast is out of time.

Meanwhile, Billy runs through the halls of the television station attempting to get to Corrine and McGrath. Unable to, he is waiting for her when she leaves the station. Billy asks Corrine to go with him. Uninterested in being Billy’s groupie and “tuning his guitar for him,” she rejects him. When the tour bus rolls by, Billy gets on without Corrine. Corrine is left alone on the sidewalk. She experiences an epiphany of sorts when, following the departure of the bus, two girls and a guitar ride by on a dirt bike blasting a broadcast of (the unrecorded) “Waste of Time”
on a radio. The girls, unaware of Corrine as they ride by, congregate with other loitering Skunks. Corrine smiles.

This is how Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains ends, or, more precisely, how All Washed Up was supposed to end: with The Stains failing commercially, but inspiring hundreds of young girls to pick up guitars and make their own music. If the film is viewed with the understanding of this as the final scene, the professional career of The Stains has also come to an end (Though The Smears, who are described only as a “cousin act,” could possibly be Jessica and Tracy, since they are unseen following the broken hair dye incident.) Perhaps then Corrine specifically, not The Stains, has been dethroned. She, by her own wishes, removes herself from the music industry as seen in the literal separation of Corrine and the only music business Corrine has ever known (by way of The Looters, Lawnboy, and the tour bus pulling away). There is a sense of resolution in that though The Stains did not “make it” in a commercial sense, Corrine is nonetheless pleased with the outcome and in control of the situation. Despite the attempt to paint her as a “little girl lost” and mere flash in the pan in the media presentations of her, The Stains’s music (specifically by way of their eerily existent record’s airplay) and their message (by way of her observation of the influenced) will continue.

But that is not how Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains actually ends. The film cuts to a coda of The Stains performing “Be a Professional” on a fictitious music television show/channel titled MTMTV. This is not how writer Nancy Dowd wished the film to end because, for one thing, such a reference (a music video channel!) did not exist when she penned All Washed Up, but by the time Lou Alder finished editing the film, MTV had transformed the landscape of popular music.
The Production of *All Washed Up*

Despite her Academy Award for *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), writer Nancy Dowd will probably best be remembered for creating *Slap Shot* (George Roy Hill, 1977), possibly the most famous hockey movie outside of the *Mighty Ducks* franchise. In writing *All Washed Up*, Dowd returned to the fictional western Pennsylvania town of Charlestown, PA. (The hockey team in *Slap Shot* was the Charlestown Chiefs.) She is amused by the incongruent nature of her, a feminist with a degree in French from Smith College, as the author of a favorite film of homosocial sports-centered interactions and referencing. *Slap Shot* focuses on a Pennsylvania minor league hockey team in danger of being relocated and the semiprofessional hockey players’ otherwise socially and economically struggling lives. *All Washed Up* likewise finds its beginnings in an economically, socially, and spiritually depressed space and time in western Pennsylvania. Dowd found the inspiration to write *Slap Shot* by way of her brother’s own Johnstown, Pennsylvania minor league hockey team’s potential relocation. Inspired by her brother’s situation, Dowd wrote the film “about a person who doesn’t know who owns him,” but the stuff of the film (the one-liners, dialogue, and the story) came from “her brain” (Gross). For the specifics of hockey, about which she knew very little, she consulted past issues of *Hockey Digest*. (Smerconish)

Dowd created *All Washed Up* similarly. Dowd claims ownership of the ideas of *All Washed Up*, but credits the inspiration as a passing interaction with “real punk.” “I was so riveted when I saw the Ramones, you have to remember that during the 70s everything in terms of the music was junk.” Nancy Dowd sought to create a film in which “girls escaped their dreary mill town lives through Rock and Roll” (Jacobson and Green). In a far more amateur setting than the Ramones’s career at the time of the film—a successful band, signed to major label, who
had stared in their own movie, Roger Corman’s *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, in 1979—The Looters (Dowd’s Ramones-stand-ins) struggle with a mismatched Metal Corpses (Dowd’s 1970s “junk”) to create a tension not only between has-beens and up-and-comers, but also between the cultures of the 1960s and 1970s.

Clearly identifying with the more punk ideals of The Looters—as demonstrated in her observation that *everything* else in the 1970s (presumably besides punk) was junk—Dowd’s portrayal of The Metal Corpses presents a commentary on the inflated, irrelevant, and self-privileging stars of rock and roll’s fading 1960s and early 70s. Although she never depicts the misogynistic and illiterate Billy as a messiah, she applies an authenticity to The Looters never projected upon Lou, Jerry, and the rest of The Metal Corpses. Even their name (Corpses) hints at the band’s obsolescence. In the film, The Looters push the envelope of acceptability of music in opposition to The Metal Corpses (in the same way The Stains will come to push the envelope of acceptability in opposition to The Looters). The Metal Corpses, it can be assumed, had previously pushed a similar envelope in the mid 1960s with their “acid rock.” The leaders of the bands seek to validate themselves at the cost of one another. The Looters see their music as a progression from the artifice of middle-aged rock and rollers while The Metal Corpses see The Looters’s music as a regression. No matter the state of progression or regression in a move from the “intricacies” of acid rock to the “simplicity” of punk, the position of male dominance remains current. In each band’s corresponding generationally “normal” world, the men are rock stars and the women are relegated to “supportive” roles. Corrine and The Stains attempt to challenge *this* notion with a purposefully more simplistic, more amateur style of music. Thus, the next “innovation” in music (The Looters), is challenged (by The Stains) on the grounds of being passé
and misogynistic in an attempt to dethrone it. Not only is a “progression” of style occurring, but a challenge of male-dominated hegemony is occurring as well.

Understandably, this challenge exists not only the filmic narratives of *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*, but also externally in the production of the film and the surrounding cultures of the musicians involved in the production of the film and the film itself. As Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie stated in 1978, “rock is a male form” and a women “[are] not encouraged to develop the skills and knowledge to become [performers]” (quoted in Auslander 195). Similarly, as the following chapter with explore further, Hollywood has long been a male-dominated industry in which few women have achieved high levels of control and power. This conflict between a strongly pro-feminist script and a clashing of the hyper-masculine worlds of music and film production, came to a head on the Vancouver, British Columbia set of the film initially titled *All Washed Up*.

Although one can assume director Lou Adler, producer Joe Roth, and the other male crew involved in the production did not seek to actively sabotage the pro-feminist plot of *All Washed Up*, the hegemony of rock culture (as well as film production) surrounding them presented a situation in which the subtle nuances associated with The Stains as being more than a “gimmick” are easily lost or overshadowed by what becomes a dominating critique of media influence. Clearly intertwined and irremovable from the feminist message of the film, the interactions between first Corrine and Dennis, then Corrine and McGrath, do little to present Corrine in a role of power without reading beyond the presentation of her as an ungendered, ornery punk. Though she “leaves behind” Dennis as she and The Stains go on tour, she is still below the dominating male “thumb” of Billy, Lawnboy, David Robell, and finally McGrath via his final and ultimate dismissal of her for being a “silly” girl. The only sense of validation she receives that her
“revolution” has not fallen completely on deaf ears disintegrates when The Stains are reinvented in the somewhat sexualized, highly gender-ized music video playing under the ending credits in which the almost dangerous punk Stains are made over as pop princesses.

If contemporary accounts of it are to be believed, the film’s production, moderately-funded but physically removed from the centralized controls of Hollywood, was conducted as if it were an unauthorized sleepover while the parents were away. According to the nostalgic interviews of Sarah Jacobson and Sam Green’s documentary on the production and culture surround the film, the dominating presence of rock and roll musicians on set created something less like a Paramount Pictures film and more like a rock tour setting up shop in town for awhile. The Sex Pistols’s Steve Jones (who along with the Pistols’s drummer, Paul Cool, and the Clash’s bassist, Paul Simonon, constituted 75% of the onscreen Looters) had become addicted to methadone while still doing heroin. Jones’s “dilemma” resulted from his inability to find either drug while on location (Jacobson and Green). Fee Waybill’s memories of the debauchery-filled shoot include a “drug trailer” where those who “partook” in “those sorts of things” would “get into character” (Jacobson and Green). Most on-set personnel retell similar tales of debauchery and excess. In Jacobson and Green’s documentary, Jones speaks of there being more sex and drugs off set than there was onscreen. This is all the more disturbing when one realizes that most of the female actors on set were underage at the time of filming.

No matter the level of inflated nostalgia at play, the set proved to be too much for Dowd. She never saw the production through to completion. Dowd claims she left the set for two distinct reasons. First, with such a testosterone-heavy and drug-fueled set, she claims that there was a general air of unwelcomeness exuded towards her from every level of the production crew. Despite tales of poor treatment of “the writer” on the sets of Hollywood productions, Dowd’s
treatment was purportedly far more extreme and unwelcoming. Ironically, the very same men who challenged her presence on the set where involved with a film (or a script, at least) that was challenging a similar hegemony in rock music. Dowd’s final decision to leave the set was ultimately sparked when her breast was “jokingly” brushed by a crewmember (Jacobson and Green), but she had long lost control of the film and its production. She was not involved in the editing and had her name removed from the final version of the film and replaced with the pseudonym “Rob Morton.”

With respect to Dowd, her situations, and the underlying themes of the film, it is easy to see the intended pro-feminist/female empowerment message in the film although it is masked by an often-opposing tale of media exploitation. Adler edited the film for over a year (Jacobson and Green). His new ending depicting The Stains regrouped and in a generic high-sheen music video was inspired by the new 24-hour music network that had launched since shooting wrapped. In the newly reimagined ending, The Stains are a success. Diane Lane remembers that they “never even filmed an ending” until after MTV had launched. She remembers that “then MTV got born and the director […] said ‘I got the ending, come back.’” Lane remembers that this was “two years” after the film initially wrapped production (Jacobson and Green). When Adler finally finished editing the film with the additional and altered ending, it was retitled _Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains_.

The bridging component between Dowd’s authorship and Lou Adler’s production may be found in British music journalist Carline Coon. Coon, acting as technical advisor, “[came] up with the look” of The Stains. She is also responsible for bringing in the actual musicians to portray the fictional musicians in the film In 1977, Coon published applauding the punk of the Sex Pistols and The Clash as an “authentic youth phenomenon.” “Whatever happens now,” she
wrote, “the force of Punk Rock will be felt in society at least until 1988… [ellipsis original to text] (127).” At a time when the fashionable thing was to announce punk rock’s death (and even before it was fashionable to announce punk rock’s death), Coon was championing the notion that no matter the commercial involvement, claims of inauthenticity, and discoveries of fabrications, punk rock’s influence was and would be powerful enough to propel its influence redundant beyond the careers of the Pistols and Clash. Coon’s previously existent relationship with The Sex Pistols and the Clash allowed for easy access to Clash bassist Paul Simonon and former members of the then-defunct Sex Pistols, Steve Jones and Paul Cook. In one respect she may have been Dowd’s feminist ally, but she was also, despite her rare identity as a respected female rock critic, deeply entrenched in rock culture.

Though she displayed an astute knack for research in her portrayal of the jargon-heavy subculture of minor league hockey in *Slap Shot*, it should not be assumed that much of the film’s authority regarding punk, the media, and rock culture derives from Dowd. Much of this credit must be given to Coon, director Adler, and the musicians starring in the film. Interestingly, at times, it may be the heavy reliance upon the “insider” knowledge of the music people that tends to mask the strong pro-feminist message of the film in favor of a highly knowing jab at the media and music industry. The situations in the film related to the dregs of the music industry, although possibly included and/or spelled out in Dowd’s original script, were more likely informed by the careers of Lou Adler, Paul Cook, Steve Jones, Paul Simonon, Caroline Coons, Vince Welnick, Fee Waybill, and Barry Ford. Because, as much as Adler is quick to point out the naiveté of the musicians as actors and filmmakers in Sarah Jacobson and Sam Green’s documentary, he would be hard-pressed to downplay the combined knowledge, experience, and expertise in the music industry held by these eight individuals, especially regarding the lowest rungs of the ladder.
Adler alone—who founded Ode and Dunhill Records, produced Carol King’s *Tapestry*, mentored The Mamas and The Papas, and produced the generation-defining Monterey International Pop Music Festival (and the subsequent film)—had enough music industry experience for several films’ worth of material. Although the story of such an overnight sensation as The Stains may be dismissible as being too far-fetched for common belief, the filmic world of its occurrence is one of such truth that the unbelievable can become believable. Though this may be a positive influence on the music-related aspects of the film, it is potentially detrimental to the story of female empowerment; something many of the men involved in the production (except perhaps for Coon, who along with Dowd was the only “high ranking” woman on the film’s crew) likely cared little about at the time of its production. The interplay between the film as a “rock film” and the plot as a “feminist story” may be one of the aspects that makes the otherwise potentially dismissible film so interesting.

Despite their levels of “success,” however contrived and undeserved, The Stains are the ultimate amateur fish-out-of-water. They lack even the most basic levels of musicianship or experience to justify their success. They, in fact, worked very little to achieve their position, something that seems to be a prerequisite for retaining “authenticity” in the face of commercial success. They are only thrust into a level of professionalism (albeit a rather unglamorous level of semiprofessionalism) by way of exploitation. They retain a certain level of authenticity in regards to the fact that they have changed very little over the short period of time between their initial mediated introduction to their performative dethronement, but their lack of substance, coupled with the hegemony of a male-dominated rock culture that relegates female “pop” to a level of assumed inauthenticity, creates far too easy marks for the men who seek to defame and ultimately banish the members of The Stains back to a level of amateurism.
The Cult(ure) of *The Fabulous Stains*

Following the failure to commercially release the film in 1981 (after the film tested poorly), the film was apparently largely forgotten. In 1984, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* showed at “a handful of art houses” (Jacobson and Green). Like its original test screening, these too were supposedly received very poorly, which led Paramount to “shelve” the film. Only a few people were aware of the film and most involved with the film (I assume most, although I guess everyone) moved on with their lives. Despite its limited screenings and no video release, Jacobson states, “*The Stains*, somehow, after almost 20 years, managed to find its audience.” That audience, Jacobson claims, includes Pat Smear of The Germs, Nirvana, and the Foo Fighters; architects of the Riot Grrrl movement, Bikini Kill; Courtney Love; pop culture commentator Jake Fogelnest; and Jon Bon Jovi. Just how that occurred without official release is a story as interesting and important as the filmic plot and the story of its production.

In 1985, the film finally received national distribution, in a manner of speaking, when it was included along with other rare and “unreleased” films as part of *Night Flight*, a four-hour program that aired on the USA Network from 1981 to 1991. A press release from January 1985, announcing *Night Flight*’s return “to its roots,” states

> These unique films are a perfect complement to Night Flight’s pop culture mix of music videos, concert footage, video art and performing artist profiles. […] We first featured cult films on Night Flight four years ago when the program began. The time is ripe to bring them back. We’ve got great movies, films that will appeal to our audience... sophisticated, intelligent and, often, avant garde.

Like the other “cult films never before seen on basic cable TV,” such as the rare 1980 pseudo-punk film *Breaking Glass, Andy Warhol’s Frankenstein* (1973), Alan Freed’s semi-
autobiographical *Go, Johnny, Go* (1959), and The Clash’s 1980 half-fiction/half-reality *Rude Boy, Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* aired during the four-hour *Night Flight* amid music videos, shorts, comedy, and general late-night basic cable zaniness four times over the course of its given weekend.\(^1\) A better-suited audience for the film could not be found.

Comprised largely of drunk and/or stoned young adults; geeks; the bizarre; and adolescent nascent drunk, stoned, geeky, or bizarre young adults, *Night Flight* was essentially a “nationalization” of the famed Los Angeles public access-like Channel Z and the dozens of other public access channels popping up across the country in the 1970s and 80s.

*Ladies and Gentlemen* aired the weekend of February 15, 1985. One can imagine zealous fandom, regular *Night Flight* viewership, and ownership/access to a VCR all coming together that weekend. Since the program generally featured otherwise obscure films, the airing of *Ladies and Gentlemen*, even with only a peripheral knowledge of the film, would be, for many, a signal to record the program. The multiple airings of *Night Flight* over the course of a weekend made for an easy setting of the VCR. With only a few presses of record buttons happening in homes across the United States, the beginnings of a small and concentrated “following” for the film could form. Jacobson’s narration supports the possibility that the film has only aired on United States television a handful of times. The limited airing of films like *The Fabulous Stains* on basic cable, coupled with home recording, led the way to the unofficial release of many similar films. “Black market” and bootleg sale, trade, and intra- and intercultural sharing allows for the possibility of a following despite its lack of commercial release. There are scattered “cyber-mentions” of additional airings on the Showtime channel, Channel Z, as well as international

\(^1\) *Night Flight*, according to the 1985 press release, aired “on Fridays and Saturdays, beginning at 11 p.m. and 3 a.m.”
airings and eventual supposed showings on VH-1-related channels, but only the *Night Flight* airings have been substantiated beyond scattered memories and claims.

Likewise, mentions of “midnight screenings” in alternative, independent, and college-related venues throughout the late 1980s and 1990s of *Ladies and Gentlemen* appear on the web, but it is presumably via the other, “less legal” methods of distribution that the film found an audience. The film was unreleased, but it has never—at least not since the mid-1980s airings of the film—been *unavailable*. That being said, in the world of obscure rock and roll films, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* occupies a very special spot. It would be an exaggeration to say it is the outsider crown jewel of obscure rock and roll cult films, but not by much. Accounts of the film are commonly accompanied by *how* one came to see the film. Dowd claims to have returned home from a party late at night to find *The Fabulous Stains* playing on television. Jones claims to have watched the film around 1988 when “someone” had “a copy of a copy.” A fan sent Fee Waybill a copy of the film taped from TV. Lane acknowledges the cult status of the film, citing its lack of theatrical distribution and *Night Flight* airings, and says of the film “it was fabulous and embarrassing and bizarre and great and iconic and just ridiculous.” (Jacobson and Green)

In 1998, Sarah Jacobson and Sam Green produced a documentary on the film. The documentary grew out of an article Jacobson wrote for *Grand Royal*, a hipster magazine produced by the Beastie Boys. In the documentary, Jacobson eloquently and simply maps out the entire narrative trajectory along with the particulars of the film’s production and reception. The documentary found an audience, ironically potentially larger than any audience attained by the subject of the documentary, when it was aired as a part of a series titled *Split Screen*. In John Pierson’s (author of *Spike, Mike, Slackers, & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of*
American Independent Cinema) introduction to Jacobson’s documentary (presumably retained from the short film’s airing on Pierson’s *Split Screen*), he ponders the possibility of the film being so obscure that only 83 people have ever heard of it. The documentary has grown to become the standing authority on the film, its fans, and their encompassing cult.

In the documentary, Fogelnest calls the film “the most important film ever made [because] it has everything in it. […] The take on the music industry, […] feminism, crazy rock and roll, and […] it’s hilarious, but it’s so serious. It’s so important, I can’t stress how important the movie is.” Jacobson tells of how Pat Smear “wanted to rerecord the soundtrack.” Likewise, she tells of how Toby Vail of Bikini Kill stated, “it is the most realistic and profound film I have ever seen.” Upon viewing the film, one is able to find the very real beginnings of the aesthetic and philosophical choices of Vail and Kathleen Hanna’s bands and Riot Grrrl movement (see the introductory chapter for Hanna’s account of the importance of *Night Flight*). A large part of the film’s cult audience, Jacobson speculates, is musicians.

Jacobson also managed to interview Dowd on camera. The elusive Dowd states, “I would never have thought it, I thought this had gone to die in the Paramount vaults. The fact that this film, unreleased, about this underground girl band, then, somehow, in its unreleased state, inspired girl bands; it’s great. This little band did live on in some weird way.” Jacobson’s documentary closes with a positive sentiment that the film will finally be getting a proper release soon. Though the documentary was made in 1998, the film failed to be released as Jacobson proudly announced. She passed away in 2004 at the age of 32 without ever seeing her prediction of a DVD release come true.

Without Jacobson, it seemed that the film would once again be relegated to the world of poorly dubbed copies and urban legend, but the film was once again resurrected in a most-
unlikely place: a thread on a message board largely devoted to high-end home theater equipment. In the “SD DVD - Film and Documentary” forum, a thread was begun by Marc Edward Heuck, the “Movie Geek” from Comedy Central’s short-lived Beat the Geeks, as an open letter to Martin Blythe of Paramount Pictures for the release of the “overlooked ‘81 satire on rock music” on DVD. On May 9, 2001, Heuck pleaded that The Fabulous Stains “deserves [Blythe’s] attention” despite his likely ignorance of the film. Heuck mentions that he ”was largely responsible for [a] recent revival at the Nuart Theatre in Los Angeles, where [it played] for four week’s worth of midnights.” Heuck directs Blythe to Jacobson’s Grand Royal article and documentary, the Split Screen episode, and Courtney Love’s belief that the film is “the best movie ever made.” Though it has gone dormant for months on end, it remains one of the only active discussions on the film on the Internet. When the DVD was finally released in the fall of 2008, the project producers of the film included Jake Fogelnet, who’s work getting the film released was begun on this thread.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains is a film about media and commercially driven success in the near-complete absence of talent and substance. It is about the professional exploitation and ultimate disposability of the female amateur. It is about the propulsion of the nascent amateur to a level of professional without years of hard work, training, perseverance, and struggle. Ironically, the film has experienced much of the “years of paying dues” not experienced by Corrine. On one level, it is the depiction of complete style-over-substance in which the image far outweighs the actual. On another level, it may be an insightful depiction of the exploitative and disposable treatment of those marginalized socially, commercially, economically, and in regards to projected talent, ability, and skill, by the media, business, and general populace. Sometimes in competition with that narrative is the narrative of female empowerment and a
revolutionary challenging of the rules of “success.” While the original ending depicts Corrine as a commercial failure, her social and cultural success is made concrete in her lasting inspiration. Romantic as it may be, the artistic and cultural influence of Corrine, despite her failure as a commercial musician, is one that seems to carry more credibility in terms of art, creation, and authenticity. Because the film was consumed, did influence, and did inspire others to not “put out” as understood by Corrine in spite of its lack of commercial release seems to reinforce the importance of such a narrative.

This chapter began to examine, through the analysis of the film’s plot, the production of the film, and the film’s cult-like following (the non-diegetic influence of the diegetic amateur musician narrative). The use of the amateur, female, and economically depressed Corrine Burns stands as a metaphor, whether intentional or not, for the struggle experienced by Dowd, who, after “failing” in the production of Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains, left the film industry. Despite her non-presence in Hollywood, her influence remains. Her on-set experience too seems to be mirrored in the plot of the film. The establishment (Adler or the media) and the upstart (Dowd or Corrine) had different visions of what the film/success should be and how to make the film/music. Ultimately this incongruity between artistic and commercial visions may have lead to the film’s nonrelease, but not at the cost of real success, that which is idealistically measured beyond commercial success. Finally, the fact that a cult of followers came to find the film by way of largely noncommercial methods, utilized its “teachings,” and spread the film in a system beyond Paramount’s control also seems to add to the mystique, influence, surrounding culture, and importance of a narrative that deals quite specifically with music beyond the standards of professionalization. In the end, the release of the DVD is a success for Dowd, Corrine Burns, and Sarah Jacobson, but it is also the death of the sub-commercial barter and
trade system that created its cult. The amateur may have won by finally being accepted in the professional world, but, in regards to the “teachings” of Corrine Burns, is that what we should want?
CHAPTER II. *ISHTAR* AND THE AMATEUR MUSICIAN AS METAPHOR

In the following chapter, the role of the amateur musician as a metaphor for the filmmaker’s experiences will be explored by way of an analysis of the 1987 film *Ishtar*. *Ishtar* is seemingly perpetually doomed to a life remembered as a “notoriously costly movie” and an “artistic misfire” so beguiled that it was called by *Time* one of the “100 worst ideas of the Century” alongside asbestos (Parish 167-8). To view the film free of the mass media’s ubiquitous maligning, if in fact this was possible, is to view a biting satire on the entertainment industry, Cold War-era politics, and the lowest rungs of the popular music industry. In fact, to view the film at all at the present time is a rather difficult task since it has never been released on DVD in North America. If one believes the claims of many involved with the film, this is intentional and speaks to the following analysis of the film. Written and directed by Elaine May, *Ishtar* will herein be analyzed in relationship to the filmmaker’s long career in the entertainment industry. It is my claim that the ultimate success achieved by the talentless duo of Rogers and Clarke (depicted by Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman) may be an allegory for the hundreds of less-talented men who achieved higher levels of acceptance and success than Elaine May, despite May’s superior talent (at least by her own understanding). Interestingly, May and others’ claims that the film was intentionally maligned by the studio adds fuel to the reading of the film’s amateur musicians narratives, their dimwittedly unintentional involvement with behind-the-scenes influence upon their success and fame, May’s career, and the music and film industries of the 1980s.

May, involved to varying degrees with entertainment industries since her childhood in Yiddish theater, struggled through ranks of far less talented, yet socially and hegemonically “more qualified” men to achieve a level of success unimaginable to a woman before her (and
barely attainable after her). Throughout her mediated career, Elaine May seemed both constantly threatened by and consistently provoking such industry attempts to soften or alter her. In her work, she provided commentary on the situation while working from within industry confines. By her own understanding, she is unable to work outside the system. Her knowledge of filmmaking is fully reliant upon the norms of mainstream filmmaking. So her options are to make films from within (and provide some sardonic and subversive commentary by way of the films) or not to make films at all. This requires a certain subtle finesse. This is perhaps why she has directed only four films. With this in mind, it seems a safe assumption that the film May would direct (*Ishtar*) following her decade away from filmmaking would comment in some way on the experience of her (either forceful or voluntary) removal/exile.

This chapter will explore the amateur musician characters, as portrayed by Dustin Hoffman and Warren Beatty in *Ishtar*, as subprofessional performers who lack “professional talent” by Western standards. They exist in relation to Elaine May’s own experiences in Hollywood: the industry, backroom dealings, and hegemonic gender inequality. Accusations exist that the film—based, in part, on Elaine May’s particular position in Hollywood and her earlier usage of subversive and obtuse critical commentary—was purposefully sabotaged by Columbia Pictures, thereby causing the resulting critical, commercial, and popular rejection of the film (Nichols, Parish). It is interesting that a film featuring the pitiful failings of untalented musicians would become synonymous with concepts of “flop” and “failure.” The film is a late Cold War era Bob Hope-Bing Crosby buddy picture featuring some bad music, but there are several other layers to the film. In this chapter, the film will be primarily viewed as critical commentary in which amateur musicians, so devoid of talent and promise of commercial and professional achievement, achieve success only by A) literally altering their surrounding
realities, thereby “lowering the bar” and B) through some random series of events and resulting closed-door dealings of men in power. Talent, quality, and even market are unimportant.

In 1975, Sharon Smith speculated, “In Hollywood [...] directing is still a man’s game, a circumstance clearly underscored by the fact that [1975’s] leading woman director achieved her singular status on the strength of only two pictures” (48). That woman was Elaine May. The films Smith spoke of were 1971’s *A New Leaf*—directed and written by May, who also starred in the film alongside Walter Matthau—and 1972’s *The Heartbreak Kid*. The year following Smith’s article, May’s third directorial venture, *Mikey and Nicky*, starring Peter Falk, Ned Beatty, and fellow film director John Cassavetes, was released. Like her previous two films, the film was turned in late and over budget. This had become May’s “calling card.” For *Mikey and Nicky* she “shot about twice as much film as *Gone With the Wind* needed” (Stephens 50). When she believed her creative vision threatened by the studio, she literally hid film in a friend’s garage. She became known as a maverick filmmaker, but not in a positive sense. Professionally speaking, she was not an ideal film director for the industry. With *Mikey and Nicky*, disagreements concerning May’s unconventional final edit—the film consists largely of long improvised scenes of dark comedy—along with frustration concerning May as a director, led Paramount Pictures to drastically re-edit the film prior to its release. Elaine May did not direct a film for the next 11 years. Though this was not the first time disagreements concerning artistic vision versus commercial potential occurred between Elaine May and a Hollywood studio, unlike her previous two films, *Mikey and Nicky* was a total commercial flop. It was her first “failure” as a film director. By the mid-1970s, May had risen—often professionally disappearing and reappearing for extended periods of time—to near-singular female membership in the Hollywood boys’ club of film directors. Though her membership in this club was always
seemingly threatened, the commercial success of her pre-Mikey and Nicky films seemed to warrant extended probationary membership. May has also long been subversively vocal about this threat.

May entered the professional entertainment industry as a comedienne in the 1950s, when she and partner Mike Nichols performed live, on television, and on record. Following their professional break-up, Nichols went on to achieve enormous success as a writer and director, with such films as The Graduate (1967), Carnal Knowledge (1971), and Primary Colors (1998). May too achieved above-average levels of success for a woman in Hollywood. Despite her relative success, she was never depicted as being as accomplished as her former partner. This could prompt one to read Smith’s tone (in the above quotation) as a criticism of May’s undeserved acclaim with the words: “on the strength of only two pictures.” Smith continues, “Nichols went on to become a top theater and movie director [following the break-up, while] May turned to writing plays” (48-9). As if to imply that the theater was a bastion of failure from Hollywood for May, the words begin to paint a picture of the far more successful Nichols as more deserving of the success he achieved. Likewise, Smith’s words imply that May’s “failure” to achieve the professional status of Nichols is based more on talent and quality than gender, hegemony, and (maybe even) personal choice.

No matter the intent of Smith’s words, the reality of May’s professional career is one riddled with commercial failure, limited exposure, and claims of unfair treatment coexisting with creative respect, a cult-like following, and notions of trailblazing. Her rise to the ranks of “leading woman director” in 1975 seems not so much an example of her rising to the surface in a pool of capable female film directors as it does struggling to reach a small corner of the surface of a far too crowded pool of less deserving male film directors. Following her 1987 film Ishtar,
the pool of mediocrity may have drowned Elaine May. When May’s final film as director—a film Roger Ebert called “a truly dreadful film, a lifeless, massive, lumbering exercise in failed comedy”—was released, it seemed to become instantaneously synonymous with the word “flop” and May’s commercial cachet as a desirable film director was nearly depleted.

Elaine May’s disappearance from Hollywood following *Ishtar* was neither her first disappearance nor the first time the media noticed her disappearance. In fact, May’s position as a creative woman in the entertainment industry was always the stuff of fluffy where-are-they-now pieces as well as fuel for May’s self-referential satire. In 1967, *Life* magazine put forth the quandary: “It’s been six years since [...] Mike Nichols and Elaine May broke up. Everybody knows what became of Mike Nichols [...] But...” (Stephens 48). The final ellipsis, original to the quotation, seems to imply that “nothing” has happened to May. Even when the team of Nichols and May was at a commercial high point, May seemed keenly aware that though it was a team, the partnership was far from equal. At least in public opinion, the team was clearly spelled-out in order of importance: Mike Nichols and a supportive Elaine May.

May, aware of her disadvantageous point of entry, subversively commented upon it in a droll and dry-witted manner. On the back cover of the 1959 album *improvisations to music*, Nichols humorously and simultaneously gloats and mocks the very notion of his “third-person autobiography” by masking all of his accomplishments under a purposely-thin guise:

mike nichols is not a member of the actors studio, which has produced such stars as marlon brando, julie harris, ben gazzara, eva marie saint, carroll baker, and others too numerous to mention, he has never toured with mr. roberts and has never appeared on such television programs as the goodyear playhouse and the kraft theatre. [Formatting original to quotation.]
Of course, Nichols had been or accomplished each of these things. May’s entry simply states, “miss may does not exist,” because as it may have seemed, without the enormous accomplishments of Nichols, the duo of Mike Nichols and Elaine May may not have existed either.

Without knowledge of Elaine May, the joke is a simple and unimportant quip. Perhaps it is a public display of an inside joke between her and Nichols. But, as Stephens points out, to view Elaine May’s creative output without “at least some fore-knowledge” of her life is to generally miss the deeply metaphoric, yet strangely open commentary of her situations. Stephens posits that without knowledge of the tumultuous professional and personal relationship between Nichols and May, “how would a reading of The Heartbreak Kid as a nyah-nyah revisiting of the moment May first met Nichols begin to make sense?” (50). Likewise, he continues, Mickey and Nicky can be seen as evidence that “the scars that May and Nichols inflicted upon one another during their years coupled together” never truly healed. Similarly with Ishtar, maybe knowledge of May’s interaction with the industry and the inner-workings of Hollywood are far too important yet elusive prerequisites to “getting it” that failure was inevitable.

Ishtar and the Songwriting Team of Rogers and Clarke

Ishtar opens with Lyle Rogers (Warren Beatty) and Chuck Clarke (Dustin Hoffman) workshopping their new song, “Dangerous Business.” They adlib possible lyrics: “Telling the truth can be bad news,” “Telling the truth can be good news,” “Telling the truth is a difficult problem,” “Telling the truth is a scary predicament,” and “Telling the truth is a bitter herb.” Clarke remarks to Rogers’s “bitter herb” that he “never heard a hit that had the word herb in it.” The duo finally agrees on “Telling the truth can be dangerous business.” The song in its near-completed state is a meaningless and pedestrian jingle-sounding ditty. It’s okay but not
exceptional. While not horribly unlistenable, it doesn’t seem to possess any great potential for commercial appeal.

On a chilly New York City evening, Lyle and Chuck stand outside of a storefront, looking longingly at a window display featuring new album releases by Talking Heads, Bruce Springsteen, and Paul Simon. Prominently featured among the new releases is the newly remastered compact disc rerelease (it’s 1987) of Simon & Garfunkel’s *Greatest Hits*. Simon and Garfunkel, more the captured image of the 1960s songwriting duo than the *Graceland* -era solo Simon, is everything Rogers and Clarke aspire to be. They are their idols.

LYLE. Look at that, Simon & Garfunkel’s *Greatest Hits*.

CHUCK. Lyle, “Dangerous Business” is as good as anything they ever wrote.

LYLE. You think so?

CHUCK. Sure. The only thing that Simon & Garfunkel or Bruce Springsteen or any of these guys have that we don't have is an agent.

LYLE. You think so?

CHUCK. “Dangerous Business” is as good as [Simon & Garfunkel’s] “Bridge Over Troubled Water” any day of the week.

LYLE. You think so?

CHUCK. I’m telling you, if we get an agent, we get a record album.

From the onset of the film, the notion is foregrounded that quality is not as much a necessity for professional success as are connections and aspects of the “business” of show business. Also made clear is the idea that Lyle Rogers and Chuck Clarke do not realize that they are bad. Neither is too bright; Beatty’s Rogers is a bit dimwitted and Hoffman’s Clarke masks his
shortcomings and insecurities with boisterous claims of grandeur. But, they earnestly believe their music is good.

In a darkened office, talent agent Marty Freed (Jack Weston) sits behind a cluttered desk. A single desk lamp lights the room. Pictures, presumably of clients, are hung on the wall behind him, but little attention has been paid to see that the pictures hang evenly. Freed himself has put about as much care into the business as he has into the pictures. He wears a heavy winter coat, hat, and gloves, leading one to infer unpaid utility bills and a tightly constricted budget. Freed is without emotion as he answers a phone call from Chuck Clarke. As he pours liquor into a coffee mug, Freed attempts to follow Clarke’s scattered introduction to Rogers & Clarke, a new songwriting team. Rogers & Clarke are looking for an agent, he tells him, and they saw Freed’s ad in Variety. Freed repeats phrases uttered by the excited Clarke, but is either too drunk or disinterested to repeat accurately. When Clarke tells him that their new song, “Dangerous Business,” is good enough for a record album and he would like to invite Freed to see them at a club called The Song Mart, Freed repeats “at the record album.”

Despite static in the communication, Freed shows up, although no less drunk than before. The Song Mart is, according to Chuck Clarke, “basically a tryout place for new material.” Following other acts (the all-girl Teacher’s Daughters singing, “I’m quitting high school ‘cause you don’t like me,” new wave band The Swing, and actual aspiring N.Y.C. band the Screamin’ Honkers), Rogers & Clarke take to the stage looking far too awkward, far too old, and far too out of place. They wear unflattering headbands that seem to accentuate receding middle-aged hairlines rather than the desired new wave hipness. Hoffman as Clarke awkwardly holds an acoustic guitar, searching desperately for the next chord in preparation for the song’s downbeat. Beatty as Rogers wears an electronic keyboard with a strap (not a keytar, mind you, but a strap
uncomfortably slung around his neck and attached to the ends of a regular Casio-like keyboard). Beatty physically dwarfs Hoffman. This makes Beatty’s bizarre adornment of the keyboard all the more uncomfortable-looking and out of place. Even the performance of “Dangerous Business,” slowed down drastically and lyrically traded off between the two performers, is an uncomfortable experience for the film’s viewer. They are not good. Worse than before, in fact. The club’s MC bids the audience goodnight as Rogers & Clarke anxiously approach Freed, “That wraps up another audition night at The Song Mart…a great bunch tonight. Good luck, kids.”

Rogers & Clarke are immediately set apart from the other “kids” at the “audition night.” They are neither as young nor as good-looking as The Teachers’ Daughters, as hip as The Swing, or as good as the Screamin’ Honkers. If this is the bottom of the professional ladder for the music industry, Rogers and Clarke are barely able to reach the bottom rung. They possess a clear lack of talent as both live performers and songwriters. Despite delusions of being as good as their heroes, Simon & Garfunkel, they are not even as good as their fellow Song Mart amateurs. The duo is presented as contrasting with the youth of their actual peers (at the “audition night”) and far less talented than nearly everyone else.

“It would be very easy to write obviously bad songs,” recalls songwriter Paul Williams, “but to write believable bad songs where they actually sound like they actually were trying to be good was the hard part and that’s what I had a great time doing” (Dayton). Rogers & Clarke are “believably bad.” They are delusional, not dumb. Let down by a post-Vietnam world that should have left them fulfilled and famous like their idols, Simon & Garfunkel, they instead are unfulfilled. It is important that their points of comparison are Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel as opposed to their fellow open mic performers, because they do not see themselves in a similar
arena to amateurs or even those who may hold a slightly higher professional status. They are clearly older and less hip and they cannot compete with the other more youthful bands because they should not be expected to be held to the same standards. By their own insistence, they are songwriters, not performers. They are, or should be, in the ranks of other great songwriters. But they are also not good songwriters. The film’s audience is made aware of this early on in the film—from the opening scene, in fact. The characters of Rogers and Clarke are never made aware of this. They remain delusionally convinced of their talent.

Freed, desperate for any work, does not entirely give up on them. He suggests that the duo “sing songs people already know. That way, if people don’t like it, they’ll still have something to applaud.” Despite Rogers & Clarke’s repeated clarification that they are not singers, they are songwriters, Freed points out “you’re old, you’re white, and you got no shtick.” Rogers & Clarke follow up with a performance of “Little Darling,” a song originally recorded by the all-black Gladiolas in 1957, only to become a hit for the all-white Diamonds soon after. Hoffman and Beatty’s performance of Rogers & Clarke’s attempt at a “re-reappropriation” seems to stiffly pay homage to this cultural lineage. The audience members of this performance, perhaps patrons of a restaurant unaware of the scheduled performance, stare with disbelief and pity as the two middle-aged men meander through the song. Rogers & Clarke are too old, too white, too unhip, and too in need of a “shtick” for even this unhip audience. One could deduce that they are possibly too unhip for any audience. Even in the absence of their own songs, here replaced by a song Lyle and Chuck presumably consider to be of the highest professional caliber, Rogers & Clarke prove themselves virtually incapable of performing at any level of professionalism in New York City.

Freed is inexplicably positive following the performance:
FREED. I got good news for you.

CHUCK. What?

FREED. I think I can get you a booking.

LYLE. For money?

FREED. Absolutely.

CHUCK. Where?

FREED. Honduras, the hotel where the American journalists stay in Honduras. (Hailing a taxi cab) Taxi! The last act left because they got nervous about the death squads, but there’s no danger if you don’t drive in the countryside.

CHUCK. How much?

FREED. Hundred and fifty lempiras a week. That’s seventy-five dollars in American money. That includes room and board.

CHUCK. That’s only $37.50 a week for each of us.

FREED. Hey, that’s right. You got a good head for figures.

CHUCK. But, Marty…

FREED. Taxi!

CHUCK. Wait a minute, Marty.

FREED. I also can get you ten weeks in Morocco at nine hundred and fifty dirham a week. That’s ninety-five dollars in American money. Unfortunately, I can only get you airfare from the Canary Islands.

CHUCK. Uh, I’ll call you about it in the morning.

LYLE. Me too.
As Freed gets in the taxi, he tells them not to think on it for too long, “a lot of acts would kill for a booking in North Africa.” The duo too bad for a paying gig on American soil is left with two options: Honduras or Morocco.

Made in the final years of the Cold War, *Ishtar* seems to reflect a lot of the zeitgeist in the United States at the time concerning the Middle East. Following media coverage of terrorist attacks, strained relationships with the Soviet Union, and involvement with Middle Eastern oil, knowledge of the region was minimal and fear of the region was high. The sandy dunes of the Middle East (of no nation in particular) came to represent both an imagined exotic far-off land, as mythologized in Hollywood film, and land of zealots and primitives. The notion in the film that “our” musical “worst” would be better than “their best” was an opinion based as much in boastful egotism and blind patriotism as in general ignorance.

Following Freed’s offer, Chuck and Lyle attempt to go their separate ways at Chuck’s insistence. Chuck needs time alone to think about the offer. The two end up at opposite ends of the same bar. Lyle insists, “It’s the only bar in the neighborhood that’s open.” Lyle makes small talk with the bartender as Chuck silently stares off into the distance, pretending not to overhear Lyle telling the story of their struggling career. The bartender asks if he would have ever heard of their act, to which Lyle explains dramatically over a soft focus dissolve, “No, we’ve only known each other about five months. Before that, we were just guys... with, uh, jobs and we wanted to be songwriters.” With Lyle’s introduction, we enter a flashback montage of Lyle and Chuck’s days before the formation of Rogers & Clarke. Though only together for a short time and perhaps unqualified for a retrospective, the delusional duo already possesses a nostalgia for a “simpler time.”
Lyle and his wife, Willa (Tess Harper), dine at a restaurant. The night’s entertainment is being provided by a solo Chuck Clarke at the piano, a sort of idealized embodiment of a Billy Joel “Piano Man” character. Chuck performs a song he has written, “Love in My Will,” to mark the anniversary of an elderly couple in attendance.

I’m leaving some love in my will
Yes, I’m leaving some love in my will
My life is nearly over, and time goes by so fast
That I wanted to give you a present
To thank you for the past

The couple is visibly offended. Chuck is upset that he may have “performed the song too soon.” Chuck’s girlfriend (Carol Kane), so impressed by the performance, offers Chuck an invitation to move in with her so that he can concentrate on his writing. She may be Chuck’s only genuine fan. Lyle passes Chuck a note. “This guy says he’s a songwriter,” Chuck says to no one in particular, “he wants to buy me a drink.” A fledgling songwriting team, delusionally optimistic and wildly self-congratulatory, is born. Chuck and Lyle spend the rest of the evening writing songs about software, accordions, love, time, and other ephemera while their significant others roll their eyes in boredom and the waitstaff cleans around them.

She said come look there’s a wardrobe of love in my eyes.
Take your time, look around and see if there’s something your size.

Lyle Rogers is a small town guy who moved to the “big city” with his wife. In his mind you either go “to New York or to Nashville if you want to make it” as a songwriter. The two were married at seventeen and, though they are both depicted as “quaint,” Lyle appears even too naïve and simple for Willa. In contrast, Chuck Clarke is a sort of cousin to Dustin Hoffman’s
Ratso Rizzo (*Midnight Cowboy*). According to Lyle, Chuck has “that kind of face, mean looking but with character.” He is streetwise, urban, slightly ethnic, and confident. He explains to Lyle, “Girls call me ‘the hawk,’ it's a long story, gang war, shit like that.” Unlike Lyle’s heartbreak when left by a frustrated Willa, Chuck tells his devoted and loving girlfriend that he has to make sure she is “Miss Right” even though she has offered to emotionally and financially support his songwriting aspirations. Though Chuck projects an air of confidence, when she calls his bluff and ultimately leaves him, Chuck is left, lyrically, “on the ledge, finally on the edge of my life.” Chuck calls Lyle, not from the ledge outside his apartment, but from the windowsill inside of his apartment to tell him he is on the ledge and prepared to take his own life.

CHUCK. Lyle, I can’t make anything work. Everything I told you is fake. It’s all make-believe. I’m a total failure.

LYLE. Don’t move. I’ll be right over.

CHUCK. Listen, don’t call the police. If this gets into the newspapers, the scandal will ruin me in show business.

Chuck not only exposes himself to Lyle as a man with faults, but as a coward. Although he speaks of himself as completely devoid of talent, we don’t get the impression that he actually believes such a thing and it is said more so that he may receive some reinforcement from Lyle that he indeed is talented. He requests Lyle to “not call the police” for fear that the “scandal will ruin [him] in show business.” Chuck Clarke, even in a moment of presented confession, is still in possession of an ulterior motive. Though it is useless to speculate about the character’s intentions to jump or not, Chuck does not actually venture from the relative safety of his apartment to a more dangerous ledge until the police officers enter his apartment through the unlocked front door. They too have called his bluff. Soon after, Chuck’s parents, his childhood Rabbi, and Lyle
arrive. As Lyle is bringing Chuck in from the ledge, Chuck confides in him that he lived with his parents until he was 32 and that he is not the man Lyle thought he was. Lyle reassures him that “it takes a lot of nerve to have nothing at your age. Most guys would be ashamed, [but] you say that you’d rather have nothing than settle for less.” Somewhere in that sentiment is a sincere compliment from the folksy Lyle.

When we return from the flashback to the bar, Chuck asks Lyle from across the bar, “what do you say we get this show on the road?”

“Honduras?” Lyle replies.

“Morocco,” answers Chuck, “it’s safer.”

Away from New York City, the United States, and Western culture, Rogers & Clarke are archetypical Americans abroad. In the Ishtar Airport, Hoffman as Clarke is dressed in white jeans and a black button-down shirt with a loosened, red leather “skinny tie” around his neck. On top, he wears a white jacket with the collar “popped” and the sleeves pushed up. Around his head is a black and red checkered headband and on the edge of his nose sits a pair of red-framed dark sunglasses. Though his attire could be easily misunderstood as indicative of the era, at nearly 50 years old, Hoffman is clearly not the “normal” wearer of the fashions of the day. Here, he is portraying the fashion sense of Chuck Clarke as an emulation of the era’s stereotypical MTV star, but as done so by a 40-something wannabe. Away from the fashion-conscious judgment of New York City, Clarke is able to present himself as the potential star he believes he is, should be, or will be. It is a presentation of the American rock star image by way of an American “nobody” gone East in search of fame. In New York, Clarke is too old, too white, and in possession of no shtick, but in the non-Western world, Clarke is an exotic other. Simply because
he is an American, he can feign and present an inflated persona based on his projected profession: American singer-songwriter.

Lyle represents, as from the beginning, Chuck’s polar opposite, but he is nonetheless also an archetypical image of Americanism abroad. He is dressed in a casual button-down shirt with the breast pocket overfilled with pens and assorted travel necessities, a light khaki jacket, and a bucket hat reminiscent of Henry Fonda in *On Golden Pond*. Beatty as Rogers is more akin to an idealized image of an American tourist à la visual artist Duane Hanson than the era’s *Rolling Stone* covers or MTV. He is the embodiment of how tourists are told not to dress in order to avoid pickpockets and con artists. Again, in his late 40s/early 50s, he is not a picturesque candidate for youthful rock and roll rebellion. But in the non-Western environment, he is a likely performer and star because of the projected air of Americanism that surrounds him. Less “rock star” than Hoffman’s Clarke, perhaps looking more like a rock star’s accountant than an international performer, Beatty’s Rogers is also an exotic other if only because the space around him has changed. He is virtually unchanged.

Lyle leaves Chuck upon their arrival at the Ishtar Airport in search of a helpful airline agent and coffee. Their stay in Ishtar, a fictional country on the “brink of revolution,” is intended to be a short one and they have only a short time to catch their connecting flight to Morocco. The New York-savvy Chuck warns Lyle to ask how much the coffee will cost before paying for it. Lyle half-heartedly accepts the advice with a wave of the hand. He is the more naively trusting of the pair only in the sense that he does not put up a front of brash, knowing confidence, but neither one is as street smart as Chuck pretends to be. Chuck Clarke now stands alone in the foreign airport exuding false machismo and an air of inflated Western confidence. Despite his imagined bulletproof exterior, he is an easy mark to the disguised Shirra (Isabelle Adjani), who
appeals to his inner John Wayne and convinces him to help out a woman in distress by giving her his passport so that she may fight the unjust oppressors of her country. This forces Chuck to remain in Ishtar and Lyle to have to travel to Morocco alone. Likewise, Chuck is an easy mark for CIA agent Jim Harrison (Charles Grodin) who under the guise of rescuing him uses him as a pawn in secretive governmental dealings. Both prey upon Chuck’s projected but easily deconstructed pseudo-confidence, masked ignorance, and Western “knowledge” of international intrigue and the mystical East. Jim, just glad to see “a fellow New Yorker,” allows Chuck to present his clearly fabricated story over dinner. Even Chuck’s knowledge of Jim’s CIA association does not produce in him a want for humility or truth.

LYLE. You see, Jim, all the big record companies want to sign us for an album, but right now, we’re just refining our songs, you know, so we don’t get ripped off by people like (whispering) Simon & Garfunkel and, you know, Springsteen. So we do it in Morocco. Then it’s ours.

JIM. You know, you’re the first guy in show business I’ve met over here. Do me a favor. Do me a favor. Do an autograph for my kid.

Jim, as a CIA agent, is not only aware of who Chuck Clarke is and what transpired at the airport involving Shirra, but also that no record company is interested in Rogers & Clarke. While he may not be aware of just how bad Rogers & Clarke are, he is well aware that no record label would be interested in them or any band that needs to come to the Middle East for a booking. Like Shirra, Jim has found in Chuck an easy mark. He offers Chuck passage into Morocco.

Believing he has, once again, been cosmically rewarded and that he is firmly in control of the situation, Chuck Clarke is oblivious to the setup. He accepts the accelerated transport from Ishtar to Morocco as provided by Jim Harrison and arrives at Chez Casablanca where “from the
team of Rogers & Clarke... Rogers” is bombing to an international crowd of jeers, unrequited requests, and general vocal complaints. Chuck Clarke, entering from the back of the room, overpowers Lyle’s noodling through “Bridge Over Troubled Water” with “That’s Amore.” What follows is a set of “That’s Amore,” “Strangers in the Night,” and “There’s No Business Like Show Business.” The crowd, staff, and performers are all elated at the familiarly Western, albeit sub-par, set of standards. This is the first success the duo has experienced. “High” from the performance, Chuck tells Lyle that he intends to “drive around for awhile,” leaving him with the assurance that tomorrow they will perform their own songs.

In between opening night at the Chez Casablanca and “tomorrow,” Lyle and Chuck enter into a series of misadventures. Chuck’s “drive” to clear his head is actually to meet Agent Jim Harrison and, while he is gone, Lyle too is seduced into aiding the revolution. Only following a farcical romp involving blind camels, gun smugglers, attempts on their lives, and the accidental acquisition of a map that has the power to bring peace to the region will the next gig occur. Amid the adventure, in the face of death, the concerns of Lyle and Chuck still center on their career:

LYLE. We're gonna miss our show!

CHUCK. Oh, no!

LYLE. Oh, yes! Yes!

CHUCK. Oh! Shit!

LYLE. Oh, yes. Well, well, well. That is it, isn’t it? Now we’re gonna get blackballed at the Chez Casablanca. We're never gonna work in Morocco again. They’re gonna call Marty, word's gonna get out. We will never get another booking.
Still under the impression that they have a career to lose, that Marty Freed is a legitimate talent agent, and that their stand in Morocco is, in some way, going to benefit their career, their ignorance spreads to cover the sheer peril they face in the desert. As they crawl away from danger, convinced that the CIA helicopter that had been firing at them just didn’t see them, they are writing “some of [their] best work.” Only after it is unable to kill the evasive duo, the CIA is ready to discuss a deal.

Freed, as Rogers & Clarke’s (talent) agent, is called in to act on their behalf:

JIM. (On phone.) Marty. Marty, if we agree to your terms, will we get the map?

FREED. I don’t know anything about a map, but if anything should happen to my clients, the map is up for grabs. Here’s the deal: One, social reforms in Ishtar as dictated by Shirra Assel. Two: an immediate live-in-concert album from Rogers & Clarke at the Chez Casablanca to be financed and promoted worldwide by you.

JIM. Promote Rogers & Clarke worldwide? No problem. Marty…

FREED. Let’s work together as agents.

JIM. My pleasure. Talk to you soon.

The following performance, the scheduled performance for “tomorrow,” is recorded for a live album. The genuinely interested, animated, and engaged audience of the previous performance has been replaced with disinterested military personnel ordered to be there. Rather than being spiritually and appreciatively moved to applause and appreciation, the American military audience must be ordered to applaud at the appropriate times. Rogers & Clarke are also different. The act is more refined with a set list consisting entirely of their own compositions accentuated with light vaudevillian stage antics, costume changes, and minor choreography.
Their songs are just as bad as before, but the act has gotten slightly better. With so much cloak and dagger espionage, it seems unlikely the pair would have had much time to practice. Yet clearly some time, possibly just a byproduct of movie magic suspension of disbelief, was spent on their act.

*Ishtar* is a proud successor to the Crosby-Hope buddy films. The songs are wonderfully designed to be clichéd, hackneyed, and pretty terrible. Only Shirra seems to earnestly believe the duo has any talent. Freed appears to still be drunk. Jim grimaces as his superiors glare at him with concern and confusion. As each song is capped off by Military Police-encouraged applause, Rogers & Clarke continue to seem oblivious to the fact that they are anything short of brilliant. The success, “encouraged” by the United States Government acting as a promotional machine backing the album’s release and distribution, however earned, is deserved in their minds. In the final scene of the film, promotional flats for *Rogers & Clarke Live: In Concert* dominate the same window Lyle and Chuck first gazed upon while speculating that all they needed was an agent. No more talented than when they began their journey, Rogers & Clarke were now professionals. Though the film does not state whether anyone actually buys the album, the fact that the album is now featured alongside their imagined contemporaries in the window of the record store denotes a certain level of professional success.

*Ishtar* seems to be making a general commentary on “extra” or “foreign” influence on notions of success, fame, and professionalism beyond talent and creative or cultural worth. The struggling songwriter, devoid of any real potential for professional status as a musician or songwriter, stands for anything easily malleable. More than a commentary specifically on semiprofessional and/or amateur musicians, it may be read as commentary on the disposable nature of the “little guy” for the purposes of the truly powerful. All the while, it is the lost and
naïve pawn, enticed by the allure of popularity, public exposure, and fame, who ventures forward like a moth to the flame. In the end, the rise to a firmly professional status of “legitimate” songwriters/performers is one earned not by way of talent, but based in scandal, manipulation, and, in this case in particular, covert operations. Though the specifics of their particular rise from obscurity and commonality to professionalism are farcical and farfetched, the particulars of their presentation as aspiring songwriters plagued with a lack of talent and cursed with a delusional confidence is rather believable and uncontrived. Faced with no option for achieving their desired fame and professional status in a Western commercial arena by way of real or projected talent, ability, or authenticity, Rogers & Clarke achieve something approximating professionalism by way of leaving a professional Western market for a more amateur Eastern market.

Elaine May’s “Orwellian” Vision

On May 15, 1987, Washington Post’s Hal Hinston wrote, “A mammoth dud, a catastrophe, a huge floundering stinker of biblical proportions—that’s what all the advance stories on Ishtar have prepared us for. In fact, it’s not nearly so grand an achievement. Ishtar doesn’t attempt enough to be considered a magnificent failure. It’s something far less substantial; it’s piddling—a hangdog little comedy with not enough laughs.” More recently, film critic Jim Hoberman said of the film “[it] is both extremely droll and—whatever its intentions—the most adroit political satire to emerge from Hollywood during the Iran-Contra stupefaction of Ronald Reagan’s second term.” Hoberman proudly states that though the film was so “universally reviled even before its belated release [and] twice panned in his paper The Village Voice” he was not one of those critics.

Mike Nichols, in an interview with Elaine May in 2006, only half-jokingly credits director Elaine May’s “‘Orwellian vision,’ for inventing the perfect metaphor for the behavior of
the [first] Bush administration in Iraq.” May retorts, “[W]hen I made this movie Ronald Reagan was president and there was Iran-Contra, we were supporting Iran and Iraq. […] It’s possible the only movies he [Reagan] had ever seen about the Middle East are the road movies with Hope and Crosby, and I thought I would make that movie.”

*Ishtar* had “three great previews” (Nichols). The failure of *Ishtar* could be called, as Mike Nichols refers to it, a “studio suicide,” a purposeful campaign against a film in order to force it into a negative shadow. In regards to *Ishtar*, this theory would posit that following a lack of financial, creative, and media-related support from the studio, critical and media reception and ticket sales would follow suit and a generally negative trend would be created. May clarifies, “I thought—only for five minutes—it’s the CIA. I didn’t dream that it would be the studio. For one moment it was sort of glorious to think that I was going to be taken down by the CIA, and then it turned out to be David Putnam [sic, actual spelling: Puttnam]. I think this man was unique in that way, in that he was going to redo Hollywood and make it a better place. He was going to work from the inside.” Puttnam had taken over as C.E.O. of Columbia Pictures in the middle of the production of *Ishtar*. May speculates that bad blood regarding past industry dealings (specifically with Warren Beatty’s 1981 film *Reds*) and a want to “redo Hollywood” created in *Ishtar* an easy target. The fact that May’s past was already marred and that she still, 12 years after Smith’s identification of May as a near-singular woman among the directors of Hollywood, was virtually alone in her gender among directors, may have made May an even easier target. She, like Lyle and Chuck, was an easy mark. The plot against *Ishtar* is not so much a conspiracy theory as it is a believable apparition of the hegemony of Hollywood, the entertainment industry, and Western culture. After struggling for year to be accepted in the industry, her brashness, disregard of budgetary restrictions, and gender may have aided in the plot against her and her film.
May explained her situation to Nichols in more detail:

I’m no one to be feared. I’m not one of those women who are not nice women. And in the end, when it comes down to it, you’re just as rotten as any guy. You’ll fight just as hard to get your way. So I think the real trick for women is they should start out tough. They don’t start out tough. They start by saying, “Don’t be afraid of me. I’m only a woman.” And they’re not only women, they’re just as tough as guys. In that way I think I did have trouble. But only because I seemed so pleasant. (Nichols)

Though May seems convinced that the alleged sabotage was directed at her, Warren Beatty’s arrogant reputation may have had a hand in the downfall of Ishtar. In reaction to an uncredited interviewer’s quote that “Ishtar is synonymous not just with commercial failure, but with something that is so bad you aren't supposed to want to see it,” Jonathan Rosenbaum, who includes a discussion of Ishtar in his Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons, stated:

I think one thing that is important for people to understand is why it became targeted and scapegoated by the media as being supposedly such a terrible movie. Warren Beatty had had in the past a very high-handed way with members of the press. The way they were handling the press on Ishtar was a lot of people saying, “You can’t have an interview unless you put Warren on the cover.” He was playing very hard to get, and this wasn't the first time he was acting this way. So I think this was a chance for a lot of people in the press to kind of get even with Warren Beatty. It wasn’t about Elaine May, it was about him. [...] if you start multiplying [Beatty’s] treatment [of] a lot of other people in the press, Ishtar was their one chance finally to get even. [...] Why single out this one, of all the films
they could get angry at? I knew one of the leading publicists at the time in Hollywood who attended an early screening of the film. And when she started laughing, people started giving her dirty looks—to give you some idea of the lynch-mob mentality.

Parrish agrees that it likely had less to do with Elaine May, but believes it had more to do with both Beatty and Hoffman and the mid-production regime change at Columbia Pictures. [I]f the regime has changed, the new regime could care less about the old picture and lets it go on its merry way, feeling that, well, it’ll be attributed to the past group, and it’ll put just one more nail in their coffin, and I can come in with a clean slate, which is what happened to a degree with “Ishtar” [...], when they had the change of regime at Columbia. David Puttnam came in, and he already had antipathy toward Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman.

No matter the focus of the supposed sabotage or whether the sabotage actually occurred, Elaine May’s position in Hollywood, as a woman in power, is in direct challenge of notions of a hegemonically male-dominated industry. May seems to have always been aware of the uphill battle confronting her as a trailblazer of the women in Hollywood, but if she dealt with issues associated with progressive gender relations and the women’s movement in her creative and commercial output, she dealt with the issues in an unorthodox manner. Hinston suggests, “As a writer, May has an extraordinarily weird turn of mind, and on the face of it she might have been the perfect person to make an updated road picture. But the suggestion that May would be the right director for a picture on this scale has always sounded like a kind of perverse joke.” In Ishtar, May created a subversive commentary on an industry that rewards the untalented, projecting them to a point of professional accomplishment unattainable to others.
A Spinal Tap for Songwriters

“If somebody loves those songs, if they mention Ishtar,” Paul Williams speculates, “it’s a guarantee that they are a songwriter or a musician because they get it, they get the humour [sic]” (Dayton). Like Rogers & Clarke, Williams is a songwriter, not really a performer. Though his status and achievements as a songwriter have allowed him access to a certain level of “in front of the camera” professionalism unavailable to him prior to his commercial success, Williams spent many years trying to “make it.” With his less-than-rock-star appearance, Williams was surely passed over in favor of more “cool” looking musicians and singers. He has long been notoriously wary of the music industry, resulting especially from his early days as a commercial songwriter with White Whale Records and A&M Records. His early attempts at performing his own songs with his quickly-formed and disbanded group, The Holy Mackerel, and his early solo attempts, failed commercially. His songwriting (including stints as a jingle writer, arguably one of the least-respected and unglamorous levels of the songwriting profession), not his performance of the songs, but their quality, was Williams’ path to professional success. It could be said that Williams’ performance (visually, professionally, commercially, musically) of the material did not do the songs justice. But when Jim Henson and Kermit the Frog sang one of his songs, a successful marriage of the visual and aural was created. In Williams’ songs, one can find both catchy pop songs and a sardonic take on the industry of which he is so wary. The collaboration of Williams and May (who, with Beatty and Hoffman, co-wrote the songs of Ishtar) is one ripe with metaphoric potential and lasting cultural impact. It could be said, like the musical experiences of the cast and crew of Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains, Williams’s own experiences in the lowest trenches of the music industry at least informed much of the musical
performance presentations. This may be why, as he states, so many of Ishtar’s fans are songwriters and musicians.

Ishtar’s presence on the web, like its lasting fan base, involves an interesting and peculiar cross-section of cult film devotees, songwriters, Elaine May fans, and others. While an international following may be perceived to a degree, it seems that the fan base for Ishtar is concentrated in the United States and Canada. I believe this is largely because the fan base for Ishtar is one interested not only in the film itself (its plot, its acting, etc.) but also in the culture surrounding the film, its defamation, and its lasting place in Hollywood culture as a flop and a failure. It seems important that an appreciation for the film be acquired in tandem with an appreciation of the film’s situation.

Jef Leeson quite easily falls into Williams’s imagined audience for Ishtar. Leeson recalls seeing the film in a small movie theater in 1987 and writing “a loungey-type tune on the way home from the movie, titled ‘Lease On My Heart,’ wondering what [Rogers & Clarke] might sound like twenty years later in Vegas.” He, in his own words, has been “eking out a living in the biz since ‘85” and reinforces Paul Williams’s comment that ”musicians get it.” Leeson launched IshtarTheMovie.com in 2006 as both a tribute to his adoration for the film and to display much of the “paraphernalia [he] gathered from Internet purchases” including scans of promotional material, a synopsis of the plot, stories of the film’s place in Hollywood history, and audio clips of the songs of Rogers & Clarke. Though the film’s official soundtrack was never commercially released, Capitol Records did release a 45 RPM single of “Little Darling” credited to “Chuck and Lyle.” Leeson has made available both MP3s of the 45 and excerpts from the film, including detailed songwriting credits, to construct a virtual album that never existed physically.
A few years ago, a man named John Mitchell was approached to write an article “explaining” his love for *Ishtar*. As he relates, he put a hold on the film at the Toronto Public Library so that when the film was returned (presumably an older VHS copy), he would be able to borrow it next. When he returned, he was “surprised to discover that he was #34 on a list of 47 library patrons all waiting to borrow” the film. (waitingforishtar.wordpress.com) It would be eight and a half months until it was his turn. It was this wait for a film that was so overwhelmingly viewed as bad —though he was a fan, he was surprised to find that *so many* others were also fans—that inspired his documentary *Waiting for Ishtar*. In the film (unreleased and currently still in production at the present time) Mitchell attempts to track down all people who are waiting to borrow *Ishtar*. Much in keeping with the standards for lateness and over-budget finances set by the original film, *Waiting For Ishtar* began as a simple, homemade film intended to be completed quickly. It has ballooned in scope, budget, and size to include interviews with several people involved with the original production.

Like *IshtarTheMovie*, the Yahoo! Group “I Love Ishtar” is a group devoted to both the film and the culture surrounding it. Though the group is far smaller than any of the dozens of groups devoted to *Harry Potter*, for example, its members are surprisingly academic and unapologetic in their appreciation for the film. One group member, Anne Dodge, commenting on whether the film is “important” or not (my word choice, not hers), sidesteps the discussion of the importance of the film slightly to forefront the popular notion that it is important if only because it represents a general hegemony against women in Hollywood. “I think the origins of [the film’s maligning] are based on the backlash against a woman director with so much power and money at her disposal” (Dodge). Another group member, Texas Christian University film professor K. Ferrel Forehand, who teaches the film as part of his “Art of Comedy” course, does believe the
film is important. He remarks, much like other fans of the film who encounter disbelief upon announcing their adoration for it, that most people who seem quick to malign the film are doing so out of some sort of cultural default rather than as an end result of critical viewing. “In my experience,” he told me, “95% of the people who say it’s a terrible film have never seen it. In all my years of getting people to watch it, I’ve only found one family that still hates it … they can’t get past the first 30 minutes.” Interestingly, Forehand states he first viewed the film after being out of the country and away from the negative press surrounding the film in 1987. He humorously recollects that he was “too dumb to know I was supposed to hate it” (Forehand).

Conclusion

May uses the character of the amateur musician as a dupe. He is the ultimate gullible and unaware individual; not stupid, but maybe a little dumb. Likewise not ignorant, he has a knowledge of his surrounding world, but pitifully hopeless and unaware that the world he intends to be a part of is beyond his reach. For others, like the film’s audience, it is obvious. For him, from within the space of performance, the sheer glory of projection of emotions by way of writing the song and the empowering act of performing the material unfortunately overshadow the fact that he is no good. Leeson opines, “not before or since has there EVER [capitalization original to quotation] been anything so great at satirizing lack of musical talent. Not even American Idol.”

The public personae of Warren Beatty, the physically attractive sex symbol, and Dustin Hoffman, the less physically attractive, but possibly more respected actor, are toyed with by May in the characters of Lyle and Chuck. Both Beatty and Hoffman were, by the time of Ishtar, Academy Award winners (Beatty for Best Director for 1981’s Reds and Hoffman for Best Actor for 1979’s Kramer vs. Kramer). Both Hoffman and Beatty were (and, despite the negative press
following the release of *Ishtar*, came to be again—Hoffman the following year with *Rainman*, Beatty several years later) members of the relatively small upper echelon of great American actors. And though both had played roles that were in opposition to, and potentially detrimental to this elevated status—whether it be Hoffman’s cross-dressing Michael Dorsey/Dorothy Michael in 1984’s *Tootsie* or Beatty’s 1967’s portrayal of bank robbing Clyde Barrow in *Bonnie and Clyde*—there may be something far more potentially harmful to a career based on talent and persona in the portrayal of a character that is a poor performer (such as *Ishtar*’s Chuck and Lyle).

Whereas, in *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*, the amateurism of Corrine, Tracy, and Jessica is what makes them cool and appealing, the amateurism in *Ishtar* is what creates gullibility. Coupled with the film’s commentary on a lack of progressive and radical female media personae to whom young girls *can* look up, the excitement of the members of The Stains being “just like everybody else” is what makes them appealing. They look differently, they act differently, they play differently than what was established even in comparison to the more culturally “alternative” options of the established Looters. In comparison, Rogers & Clarke are not an exciting option in comparison to either their amateur peers or their idols, Simon & Garfunkel. Whereas The Stains’ s fumbling on stage adds a level of endearment to their presentation when later they rally and perform well; Rogers & Clarke’s rallying point never really happens. Even in the end when accompanied by silly stage antics, military and governmental backing, and a shred of confidence, their *still* bad material only heightens that they are still out of their proverbial league.

The Fabulous Stains and Rogers & Clarke represent two extremes of amateur musician narratives. In *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*, the struggle of trying to “make it,” even though they really never seemed to try to make it, is used to reinforce aspects of
authenticity, despite their fabricated and mediated nature. In _Ishtar_, Elaine May creates characters who, despite a complete and total lack of commercial potential and appeal, are rewarded because they, in the intended clichéd manner, just want it bad enough. The fact that they have achieved success does not (as their resulting path to commercial success illustrates) speak to the quality of their material. It is still bad. As if May (with Beatty standing behind her) is shouting, “just ‘cause it’s a success doesn’t mean it’s any good!” in reaction to studio backlash over costly films that, despite critical approval, failed commercially. The songwriting duo of Rogers & Clarke represent the film she could have made. They succeed despite their sub par quality. If she had made concessions, played the game as the industry would have her play it (which very likely would include bowing to the males in power), she may have avoided the alleged sabotage, but the resulting film, for better or worse, would not have been _Ishtar._
CHAPTER III. *HALF-COCKED* AND A CAPTURING OF THE AUTHENTIC AMATEUR MUSICIAN NARRATIVE

In the following chapter a little-known film titled *Half-Cocked* (1995) will be analyzed. The film presents an “alternative” to the big-budget films discussed in the earlier chapters in regards to both the music being of the genre of music commonly known as “alternative music” and because the film is a commercial and cultural alternative to the previous films. The film was a very low-budget production with limited appeal. The limited nature of the target audience, those familiar with either the local scenes and music featured in the film or similar scenes, was matched by the intentions of the crew who sought to make a film about and for the musicians and fans featured in the film. The production was essentially a quick, self-financed romp through the US South more similar to an indie rock tour than a feature film production on-location. Like the majority of the crew working on the set of *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*, the crew and actors working on *Half-Cocked* were filmmaking amateurs. This was the first time most of them worked on a film and would remain the only film for many of them, nearly all of whom were struggling musicians in the early years of their professional music careers. When it came time to premiere the film, the filmmakers once again thwarted film standards by largely avoiding film festivals and traditional distribution methods and toured the film to many of the same clubs featured in the film.

The music industry of the early 1990s was a vastly different industry than it is today. Commercial successes were counted in millions of units sold, MTV played music videos, home computers had very little to do with the production or consumption of music, and Kurt Cobain was still alive. Following the commercial and professional rise of Cobain’s band, Nirvana, the “birth” and subsequent marketing of the grunge genre, and the identification of Seattle as a
musical Mecca, targets were set by media outlets and the mainstream record labels on “the next
Seattles,” in “hopes [of finding] not just individual bands but a ‘sound’ […] both authentically
local and appealing to a broad public” (Pareles). For years, numerous magazines and newspapers
proclaimed different “newly discovered,” burgeoning, and ripe-to-be-the-next-big-thing towns.
Aspects of the “indie underground,” part-real/part-imagined, preexistent community of
geographically dispersed scenes that centered on interconnections of groups of subcommercial,
precommercial, and noncommercial musicians, found entry, if only on a level of restricted
access, into the mainstream music industry upon being “discovered.”

A 1992 Daily Variety article spoke of two Island Records A&R people who “armed with
a new set of wheels and a cellular phone” visited “Columbus, Ohio; Dallas; Los Angeles; and
Fresno” in search of the “next big thing.” Their intention, fully funded and endorsed by the label,
was to visit all music scenes in the continental United States in the next year. At the time of the
article’s publishing, they had found “some cool scenes,” but noted that what they actually found
were “a few [scenes] that will not be the next Seattle.” Of course, they never succeeded in
visiting all the nation’s music scenes. “In July [of 1993], Entertainment Weekly labeled San
Diego the nation’s ‘Cool Music Scene;’ a month later, Billboard dubbed Chicago ‘the new
capital of the cutting edge;’ and finally, in October, Time handed the crown to… Halifax, Nova
Scotia” (Tough). The reception of the attention thrust upon these scenes was mixed and, despite
the existence of several great local scenes, all failed to produce “another Seattle.”

In 1992, a Washington, D.C. journalist stated, “the mass media culture vultures are
clearly hungry for a new Nirvana, scouring the land for the next Seattle, and the focus seems to
be shifting here, to the other Washington” (Brown). According to Brown, D.C., like Seattle
before it, had paid its dues and was set to be the next big thing. Despite its failure to become a
source of commercial music on the level of Seattle, Washington, D.C. continued to be a vibrant music scene. Similarly, when Chapel Hill, North Carolina was named the next big thing, Merge Records cofounder Mark McCaughan said “[I]f someone said a year ago we’d be in Details or Entertainment Weekly, I’d have said, ‘That’s strange.’ You’re trying to tour, run a label, [the article] comes out, and someone brings it to you. You glance at it and keep working” (Davies).

Coinciding with the city’s New Music Seminar in 1993, The New York Times ran a series of small articles on several geographic scenes, each dubbed a “next Seattle.” The cities included Chicago, Miami, and Louisville, Kentucky. Neil Strauss identifies a “distinguishing element of the Louisville scene [is it’s a scene in which] few bands last long enough to make it big.” A self-fulfilling prophecy perhaps, but of the representative bands Strauss names—Squirrel Bait, “Bastro, Love Jones, Gastro del Sol, Big Wheel, Starbilly and Louisville’s most revered guitar contortionists, Slint”—only Slint possessed a shelf life of considerable duration, suitable for circulation outside of Louisville. Even Palace Songs—who, along with the Slint-related King Kong, is mentioned as a performer in the then-touring Lollapalooza Festival—was only a temporarily-used moniker of Will Oldham, who abandoned it in favor of Bonnie “Prince” Billy. Overlooked by the list is math rock pioneers Rodan, in some circles referred to as the “other Louisville band” in the era of Slint’s primacy. But just as Strauss noted, Rodan did not last long enough for much recognition. The band formed a year before Strauss’s article and was preparing to record its 1994 debut/finale Rusty at the time. Rodan would break up the following year, but not before most of the band was tapped to play a group of friends who steal a van full of music equipment and, in order to support themselves, begin playing shows as a band called Truckstop. The film, Half-Cocked, was missed by most people outside of “the scene.” By the time it was
released, Kurt Cobain was dead, the “salad days” of indie-to-major label crossovers were coming to an end, and Rodan had broken up.

For an understanding of the importance of the scene in popular music, I am indebted to communications scholar Will Straw whose article “Communities and Scenes in Popular Music” points out the often-subtle differences and nuances of a “scene” as opposed to an older notion of a “musical community.” He continues:

The [musical community] presumes a population group whose composition is relatively stable—according to a wide range of sociological variables—and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within geographically specific historical heritage. A musical scene, in contrast, is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interact with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and accordingly to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization. (494)

The fleeting nature, tied to a specific region at a specific time and composed of specific community members, is a primary distinction of the scene. By Schippers’ understanding, the scene becomes “diluted” when attempts are made to preserve the scene by way of mainstream commercialization in an attempt to define the scene as a “genre” (14). Straw agrees that within a scene, a “hybridization” and “cross-fertilization” occurs that is incongruous with either concepts of geographically-based music communities or commercial music marketed as geographically-centered genres. While the marketing of a genre tied to a location is rather simple and the preservation of a musical community is often rather desirable, to “authentically” capture a scene is a near impossibility.
Celluloid Music Scenes: Seattle, Houston, and Louisville

Film, like the record labels (and often related to the record labels), followed suit as major motion picture studios (and major “independent companies”) produced films set in some of the scenes and locales that were the focus of so much attention in the early 1990s. Often these films featured a group of middle-class hipsters living below the standards set by their suburban upbringings. Set in newly gentrified or gentrifying urban environments, the films featured a cross-section of artists, young professionals, college students, and slackers, and there was always a band. Cameron Crowe’s 1992 Seattle-based film *Singles* featured members of Pearl Jam and Soundgarden “acting” in support of Matt Dillon’s portrayal of a vocalist for struggling fictional band Citizen Dick. The band has had minor alternative weekly press and ’zine coverage, a record deal with an independent record label, and the desire for professional success. The struggling Citizen Dick is merely a subplot of a film primarily focused on a rather lightweight tale involving educated, middle-class, twenty-somethings struggling with relationships, careers, and generic Generation X unfulfillment—sort of the distant nieces and nephews of Lyle Rogers and Chuck Clarke’s generation—but their story is nonetheless a central plot device used to “gain entry” into the Seattle urban underground, of which they are surrogates. Similarly, Ben Stiller’s *Reality Bites* (1994) features a subplot involving Troy’s band, Hey That’s My Bike. Troy (Ethan Hawke) is unable to hold a job. He is the quintessential slacker of his generation: talented, yet unmotivated; without money or an income, but seemingly not entirely destitute. He has unrealistic and romantic aspirations to “travel the countryside like Woody Guthrie.” And though he seems to spend little to no time actually refining his craft, his band is his central preoccupation.
Both films attempt to capitalize on a currently available mediated cultural trend, “grunge-like” alternative music, as a cultural reference so as to connect to an audience. Neither film’s narrative is intertwined with the local music scene of the Seattle of *Singles* or the Houston of *Reality Bites*. The musicians’ presence in the plot is foregrounded in regards to cultural references, but unimportant to the overall plots of the films. Though both films are likely a part of the cultural canon of “Generation X,” the authenticity of these films is a difficult sell. *Singles* feels like a Hollywood film set in Seattle rather than an authentic product of the culture. Even the presence of members of Seattle’s then-cutting edge Pearl Jam and Soundgarden, a performance by Alice in Chains, and Crowe’s sincere relationship with the city cannot save it from cries of foul in regards to representations of struggling musicians by struggling musicians. Though the actual musicians had at one time been very similar to the struggling musician characters they portray on screen, they had already been swept up by the corporate music industry by the time of the film’s release. Furthermore, in both *Reality Bites* and *Singles*, the bands dominate the identities of their members/characters without any performance, substance, or really positive representation. The fact that these are lowly, common, and amateur musicians only serves to further Matt Dillon’s performance as an unfaithful bad boy and Ethan Hawke as a mysterious slacker. Though well-acted, entertaining, and well-loved, both films are clearly products of a level of professionalism unable to portray a level of musicians’ amateurism in a misidentified “newly discovered” subculture with any degree of authenticity.

*Half-Cocked*, on the other hand, is a film able to present a near-documentary-like authenticity despite its fictional subject. Any film is a documentary of its production and a “true” documentary is always a little fiction, but *Half-Cocked* simultaneously offers a farcical, fictional film with an unbelievable plot and an authentic depiction of a real music scene at a specific
moment in time. In the 1990s, Michael Galinsky was the bass player for a band called Sleepyhead and an amateur photographer. Suki Hawley, then Galinsky’s girlfriend, was an usher at Film Forum in Greenwich Village (a job she took so she could watch and study old films) who spent a lot of time hanging out at indie rock shows. When the two came into some free film, they set out to create a document of an indie band scene. It was their intention that the film serve as a representation of the culture surrounding actual touring bands, actual local scenes, and actual gigs. The duo sought to capture a certain zeitgeist around them, their friends, associates, collaborators, favorite bands, and other semiprofessional and amateur musicians. Rather than make a documentary, they made a fictional film. Rather than focus on the over-mediated New York City, they went to Kentucky.

What follows is an exploration of the narrative of Truckstop, a “brand new” band traversing local independent music scenes. Unlike the previous two films discussed in this chapter, Half-Cocked was created in an embedded manner. Without financial backing from a major (or minor) studio, the filmmakers funded and created their film on their own. This had two major effects on the film. One, the film was made without corporate or Industry influence, for better or worse. And two, the film can be seen as a more ”authentic” film in regards to the scene it purports to present. Unlike Singles, Half-Cocked is as “indie” as its narrative. At times, at the expense of production quality, Half-Cocked is “underground” and indicative of the local scenes portrayed in the film. This is all the more important when the relationships between the film’s characters and the actors portraying the characters are explored. The film becomes a more representative picture, specifically of the largely-overshadowed early 1990s Louisville music scene, but generally of any number of the aforementioned “next Seattles” in the days after Nirvana “broke” and before the Internet provided greater access to the work of unsigned bands.
We Give the Money to the Out-of-Town Band

*Half-cocked* centers on a Louisville, Kentucky twenty-something named Tara (Tara Jane O’Neil under the pseudonym of Rhonda). Tara is a relatively new resident in a rock and roll flophouse known as the Rocket House. In Tara’s words, it’s “really weird.” Tara, recording her introspective musings on a small hand-held tape recorder, feels “it is really good to be out of the parents’ house,” but felt closer to the other inhabitants of the house prior to moving in. At the Rocket House, several bands practice, band members and other scenesters live, and a lot of the late night (after the gig) parties are thrown for out of town and local bands. Maybe it seemed like more of a fun idea prior to moving in. Now, from within the eye of the storm, she is split between the carefree culture of several bands’ practice schedules, late-night parties, and her need to earn a living during the day. *She* must “pay rent, so all the freaks can stay here.” Over scenes of cluttered bedrooms, walls full of arbitrarily hung posters, overpopulated rooms, and scattered guitars, Tara tells of “another party” the night before with “one band upstairs, one band downstairs, beer all over the middle.” Despite her complaints, she is strangely appreciative of the manic world surrounding her. Tara’s only real woe seems to be that although she is surrounded by artists, musicians, and other people who “make things” in the creative environment of the Rocket House, she doesn’t “do anything.” She is not a musician or an artist.

Tara’s brother, Otis (Ian Svenonius), is a musician. He has a band called The Guilloteens. The Guilloteens are peripherally connected to the Rocket House, but are not residents—as if they used to be more connected in their earlier days, but have outgrown it. Not entirely disconnected, the members of Otis’s band possess an intimate knowledge of the house, Tara’s recent relocation there, and the goings on of the house. They are of the same local music scene, but The Guilloteens are somewhat self-removed from the common everyday goings on of the Rocket
House scene. They are self-appointedly above the perceived commonality of the Rocket House. The Guilloteens are, in Otis’s mind, of a higher caliber, only waiting for that “something” that will project them to the “big time.” Otis has outgrown Louisville, and wants to get out, if for no other reason than because he “can’t stand seeing [his] sister on the street everyday.” He treats her request for a “plus one” guest list inclusion for the night’s gig like an annoyed celebrity unappreciatively brushing off a common fan. Otis possesses little love for anyone besides himself and his band. Even his love for the members of the band appears fleeting as he uses them more as a tool for his vision than as collaborators and friends. Their lack of dialog seems to suggest a sort of interchangeability among them in Otis’s mind.

Tara, on the other hand, seems genuinely hurt that Otis has little time for her. They have common friends, or so it would seem as she socializes with other members of The Guilloteens, and hangs out in similar locations. She wants his approval and his friendship. Otis seems to feel he needs little of either from her or others. Like the Rocket House and Louisville, she has nothing to offer him, his band, or his music. Louisville is no longer his home by choice or his emotionally salient “local scene,” it is more an accident of his birth as he is gladly ready to leave for greener, more professional pastures, just as soon as he is “discovered.” In the meantime, he “perfects” his craft and waits.

In stark contrast to Otis’s inflated ego, his gig, the one he gave Tara such a hard time about getting into for free, is scarcely of his intended professional caliber. The gig is essentially a performance to only a handful of spectators in a dive bar. All the same, Otis performs as if he is projecting to hundreds of people. He emotes with a cocksure arrogance performed to imaginary balconies of an imaginary theater. The Guilloteens, undoubtedly of Otis’s design, are an extremely image-conscious ensemble. In order to work the room into a “frenzy,” the band leaves
the stage following its final song to prepare for a “triumphant” encore performance. The meager crowd is hardly worked into anything resembling an anticipation-fueled frenzy. Sensing an opportunity to playfully hijack the evening, Tara and her friends (other residents of the Rocket House among them), take advantage of an unmanned stage full of instruments. They take to the stage to ape a musical performance, seemingly with little premeditation. They are “naturals.” The performance is a playful cacophony of mismatched parts: part self-mockery, part “primitive expressionism.” They don’t know what they are doing, but it’s not bad. Otis, becoming aware that his leave-them-wanting-more break has been hijacked, leaves his miniature trampoline backstage to halt the amateurish performance with a slap to Tara’s face. As if to signal that Tara is both wrong and offensive, Otis’s slap is both an overreaction and scarcely a proper way to end the admittedly intrusive performance. Otis “corrects” her musical and professional “mistake,” thereby apparently bringing Tara and her friends’ brief tenure as a (parody of a) band to an end.

Afterwards, The Guilloteens load equipment into their van and discuss what went wrong with the show. Unbeknownst to them, a hidden Tara sulks in the rainy shadows outside the club, still upset by the slap. This would “never happen to a real band,” Otis complains, “like the fucking Lemonheads or Dinosaur, Jr. or even the Stooges.” Like Ishtar’s Rogers and Clarke, Otis’s points of comparison are far more accomplished bands as opposed to those in his local scene. In regards to the evening’s opening band, Juanita, Otis’s only comment is that Juanita is a “stupid name.” While Otis dismisses the lesser Juanita, Tara thinks they are “pretty good.” Otis’s concept of the superiority of The Guilloteens over its local contemporaries goes much deeper than just a dislike of a band’s name. For all intents and purposes, The Guilloteens are the villains of Half-Cocked. Tara and her friends are the heroes, despite what they are about to do.
When The Guilloteens step away, Tara, again seemingly without premeditation, steals the van. She drives away with the van full of band equipment and catches up to her four friends walking down a darkened street. Pulling in front of them, she says, “Get in.” Everyone excitedly piles into the van with no clear direction or intent. They are a roving “band on the run” in the narrative sense with only a lack of musical ability, repertoire, and intention preventing them from being a musical band.

They drive through the night. In the early morning, as they arrive in nearby Chattanooga, Tennessee, Tara exclaims, “We’re here.” “Here” seems an arbitrary designation, dictated more by exhaustion than intention. Sobering to the reality of their theft, with less than ten dollars between them, Tara, Jeff (Jeff Mueller), Jackson (Jason Noble), Cynthia (Cynthia Nelson), and Elliot (Jon Cook) contemplate their next move. They attempt shoplifting, only to fail when they run for fear of being caught with only a handful of snacks. Though they have stolen a van full of hundreds of dollars worth of musical equipment from family, friends, and acquaintances, they are not really criminals or are just not very good criminals. They are middle-class kids who, deviant and subcultural as they may be, are largely law-abiding. When the option of selling guitars to buy food is brought up, the would-be pawner is quickly corrected that such an action would be “wrong.”

Faced with an “honor among thieves” morality and an unspoken consensus that this adventure is not yet coming to an end, the gang must figure out how to eat. Their situation dictates their options: they are young, somewhat hip twenty-somethings with a van full of rock instruments, why should their apparent lack of musical ability prevent them from being a band? Following a meal of shoplifted candy bars, the friends walk to a local independent record store. Nervously, Elliot informs the clerk that they are an out-of-town band on tour, but their gig in
Chattanooga got canceled. He asks if the clerk is able to help them get a gig for the evening. Though unexcited by the request, the clerk, out of moral obligation to help out a fellow purveyor of independent music, calls to see if the band can get on an existing bill for the evening. As he dials the phone, he asks what kind of music the band plays.

“Experimental, kinda noisy,” Elliot answers.

“Fucking Sonic *Spoof*,” the clerk mutters under his breath, accusing the band of being *another* Sonic Youth soundalike band. The band is welcomed on the bill without a note heard. The gig is booked without any sign or proof that they are A) an actual band and B) a capable band. Even Elliot’s easy-to-disprove story of a cancelled area gig seems all-too-casually accepted as truth. Later, when the store’s clerk reappears as the performance venue’s doorman, he is asked by a patron paying him the cover charge what “*this* band” sounds like, motioning to the directionless meandering on the stage preceding the performance. After a short high-pitched squeal of feedback caused by Tara and her friends’ inexperience setting up the music equipment, he answers, “art rock.”

Before the start of Truckstop’s (as they are now called) debut gig (second gig if you count their short cameo at The Guilloteens concert), the store clerk/door man motions for Sean (Sean Meadows), a local musician and member of the evening’s headlining band, Esoteric. He informs Sean of a strange phone call he received from Otis, “the guy with the hair.” Otis asked him to be on the lookout for his sister and her friends. They stole his van and all their equipment. The two laugh it off, seeing no potential connection between the theft and the bizarre “art rock” band preparing to take the stage. “Arty” as the band may be, they are clearly a *real* band and not a gang of roving van thieves. In this environment, the squelches and squeals frowned upon in other genres and styles of popular music are accepted as musical sounds.
When the friends come to all be on the stage at the same time, they begin to pick up instruments and take positions on a first-come-first-serve basis. They wander and sort of end up where they end up, picking up the instrument nearest to them: Elliot at the drums, Jeff and Jackson on guitars, Tara on bass, and, ultimately and by default, a scared-looking Cynthia wanders to the microphone. She takes on the role of lead vocalist. The band looks around—they hadn’t really planned past this point. With no songs, no planned set, and no real ability, the non-musicians all look to one another for the beginning. Elliot hits the snare and then an arhythmic beat of the floor tom. Everyone else follows, playing a similarly unrelated series of notes, spurts, pseudo-chords, and screeches. Cynthia begins to vocally wander atop the cacophony.

The crowd, consisting of a dozen or so onlookers, stands uncomfortably close to the stage. Most are unfazed by the band’s lack of traditional musicianship. One or two become intolerant and walk away, but others stand in stoic silence, accepting that this is a band worthy at least of observation. The music not so much lacks a beat, but consists of *too many* contradictory beats. As the energy of the performance elevates, some in the audience begin to smile. Sean walks from the doorman’s station to the front of the stage; he is genuinely enamored by the starting notes of the show. He stands, arms crossed, in openly positive approval. He rhythmically nods his head to a beat possibly observable only to him. He gazes on at their difficulties as if watching a gaggle of eccentric savants. Sean, like the store clerk/door man, does not question the validity of Truckstop as a legitimate band. In fact, he likes them. Mid song, Tara relinquishes her duties as bassist to Cynthia in order to take on a new role: tossing empty beer bottles into an empty aluminum trashcan, set center stage, while the others play to her lead. Not only has the band achieved the often elitist and exclusionary label of “art rock,” they have *grown* to achieve “performance art” status.
Sean approaches them following their performance and sincerely questions whether his band is worthy and capable, of following such an act. “Man, that was fucking incredible. That was so good. That was so intense. I’m completely blown away by you guys.” To the lay listener, the atonal ramblings of the non-musicians on stage may seem as far from a believable rock band as possible, but to others it is good “ugly rock music” (Albini). If it is unclear why everyone is buying Truckstop’s story, the similarities between Sean’s Esoteric and Truckstop seems to, if nothing else, justify the validity of Truckstop as believably “passing” as a real band. Really, they have, much like The Stains in Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains, become a band simply by willing it to be. With the desire to be a band (coupled with a van full of stolen equipment and an intimate knowledge of the norms of the scene), the band has not only grown rather quickly to be a working band, but they are on par with the more relatively established headlining band.

Professional Musicians Acting Like Non-Musicians Pretending To Be Musicians

Half-Cocked is not very well acted. The film’s “indie feel” is due in part to the grainy, black and white look of the film that may have been as much an artistic decision as a necessity for independent film production on a budget. Extras recur. Locations are limited. Louisville, Kentucky and Chattanooga, Tennessee stand in for other locations as well as for themselves. The dialog, at times, feels more like a conversation overheard from the next stall in the bathroom of a dive bar during a friend of a friend of a friend’s band’s gig. It is often jargon-laden and monotonous. The film has a limited appeal and limited audience. It demands a near encyclopedic knowledge (or a desire for a near encyclopedic knowledge) of either the Louisville music scene of the early-mid 1990s or a comparable location at a comparable time. These are not necessarily negative observations, however. The film is a portrait of a pre-Internet, sub-recording industry
musical community unparalleled in fictional, narrative film. It is likely unparalleled in nonfiction documentary film as well. But, *Half-Cocked* is certainly a fiction... sort of.

The film feels authentic because, in a sense, it is authentic. It is far removed from corporate influence in the sense that being shot on such a low budget (*actual* low budget, not multi-million dollar low budget), the film was free from answering to corporate investors, marketing groups, and test audiences. Likewise, the roles, while at the possible sacrifice of acting quality, were just barely removed from their actors. They were not characters conceived by one and interpreted by another—each character was developed by the actor portraying him/her and fit into the loosely constructed film written by Galinsky and Hawley. The characters thus were actually versions of the actors in the sense that they were developed based in their portrayers’ own experiences as musicians in the Louisville and related scenes. Without a single professional actor among them, the characters’ interactions, dialog, and actions are carried out in a manner that resembles an anecdotal road story more than trained acting in a movie. While not autobiographical in any sense (all of the actors in Truckstop were *actually* musicians, even though in the movie they played music potentially dismissible as being “nonmusical,” plus no one *actually* stole a van), the characters present a version of the actors, less-mediated lives unavailable elsewhere. O’Neil recollects, “We were kind of surprised that they wanted to use us as their “band”. [W]e did know [Hawley and Galinsky] from some touring, but none of us were actors, nor did we aspire to be actors” (Helb).

“These guys were non-actors; they were professional musicians… acting like non-musicians who were pretending to be musicians. Anyway it got more confusing than that” (“Lost in Spain”). Cinematographer Michael Galinsky explains that the birth of the film came when he was on tour with his band, Sleepyhead, and met a “bunch of really great people” (“Lost in
Spain”). The movie, shot at least partially on free film, was made by Galinsky and now-wife Suki Hawley (the film’s director) using actual musicians, actually on tour, with actual audience members as extras. Thought the two speculated that they could have made a documentary, they viewed the production of a fictional film more favorably as a way to document the scene they wished to showcase. Interestingly and contrary to conventional assumption, the crafting of a fictional film was seen as a more authentic way to present a document of the time by way of a plot that, on its surface, appears to be far-fetched, harebrained, and unbelievable.

The members of fictitious band Truckstop, the group that came into being only when the nonmusicians in it willed it into being, were acted by Tara Jane O’Neil (using the pseudonym of Rhonda to separate herself from the role), Jeff Mueller (Jeff), and Jason Noble (Jackson). At the time of the film’s production, all three were in the band Rodan. Also in Truckstop was Jon Cook (Elliot). A Louisville musician and former member of Rodan, Jon Cook was, at the time of filming, playing in a band called Crain. The final member of Truckstop, Cynthia Nelson (Cynthia), was a member of New York-based Ruby Falls, an all-female rock band. Though not a parody of Rodan, nor presented as being Rodan in any way, it can be assumed that Truckstop is at least partially modeled on Rodan and/or Rodan’s experiences if only because of all the members in the fictional band who were or had been in Rodan.

Formed in Louisville, Kentucky in 1992, Rodan had recorded what would be their only full-length album, Rusty, released on Touch and Go imprint Quarterstick Records in 1994, by the time filming of Half-Cocked began. The band was actively touring and playing local gigs and Rusty (recorded but not yet released) was garnering interest in the indie underground. Unfortunately, Rodan did not survive long beyond the album’s release, breaking up soon after and before Half-Cocked was finished and released. The members of Rodan went on to form and
play in bands such as The Sonora Pine, Retsin (Cynthia Nelson and Tara Jane O’Neil), June of '44, Shipping News (credited with giving NPR program *This American Life* much of its musical identity early on), and the Rachels. Though all members of the band have continued to produce music and remain residents of the oft-romanticized “indie rock community,” the post-Rodan music produced by its splintered components is all “totally different from what [Rodan] had been doing” (O’Neil). Outside of the band’s sole album, Rodan is sadly under-documented despite its renown and acclaim. In fact, the most authentic snapshot of the band as a live unit and its surrounding community may be by way of the fictional Truckstop in *Half-Cocked*.

In addition to the musicians “acting” as Truckstop, who unsurprisingly *actually* play the music heard as being performed by Truckstop in the film, other characters in the film are played by other musicians. Sean Meadows, who plays the character of Sean, has performed in several actual bands, most notably Dischord Records recording artists Lungfish, as well as several “projects” with revolving line-ups similar to Esoteric (though it seems that Esoteric was a fictional band fabricated for the film). Otis, the arrogant leader of The Guilloteens (like Esoteric, a fictional band formed for purposes of the film), is played by Ian Svenonius. The band also features James Canty and a silent David Pajo. Svenonius and Canty were, at the time of the filming of *Half-Cocked*, members of the recently defunct influential post-hardcore band Nation of Ulysses (also on Dischord Records), a band that would soon after filming morph into The Make-Up. Though Canty “acts” in a small number of scenes, Svenonius, whose *actual* over-the-top stage persona and self-mocking stylistic presence is the driving force behind (or in front of) his various musical combinations, dominates. His character Otis is simultaneously a parody of and earnest effort to embody the “front man” identity. David Pajo, best known as the guitarist for
Slint (the scene’s best known band), is virtually unnoticeable in the shadowed backgrounds of the film.

Other musicians include Sub Pop artists The Grifters sharing wisdom from their years on the road, Catherine Irwin from Thrill Jockey Records’s Freakwater performing the song “Drunk Friend” in the Rocket House, and an improvisational ensemble featuring director Suki Hawley playing in the basement of the Rocket House. “Schedules were tight,” the filmmakers relate in the liner notes for the Matador Records’s release of the soundtrack album, “one band getting off tour, another just about to leave. The crew were friends who wanted to help out and the extras were anyone who passed by. [...] 15 days of total shooting. 24 hours later, Crain was gone on tour.” The production set up shop in the real Rocket House when in Louisville and at the similar Nautilus house while in Chattanooga. When no one showed up to open a club on a day they were scheduled to do a shoot, they improvised. It was a lot like being on tour.

What the musicians lack in acting abilities, they make up for in experience, authority, and dedication. The film was literally shot on tour from one actual band vehicle to another. Rather than using staged sets, the crew traveled between Louisville, Chattanooga, and Nashville, filming in friends’ homes and the bars and clubs on their regular tour route. In addition, to film a gig, rather than staging the gig, the musicians’ bands (Truckstop, Esoteric, Juanita, The Guilloteens, and The Grifters) played actual shows despite the fact that not all of the bands were “real bands.” The extras appearing at the bands’ shows were actual concert attendees and/or friends of the musicians who were coaxed to attend. Based primarily in their lack of ability to do otherwise (e.g. act), the filmmakers were forced to actually produce a concert in order to film a concert. Likewise, when the character of Otis is to slap the character of Tara, Ian Svenonius really did slap her. Responding to my comment that it “seemed pretty real,” O’Neil replied that “[I] didn’t
like it, he didn’t like that. [W]e had to do several takes. [H]e and [I] had to go outside and shake it off. [B]ut it seems pretty real on screen, that’s what we were going for” (Helb).

Possibly the most confusing blurring between the actual of real life and the fiction of *Half-Cocked* surrounds the portrayal of a character named Tara by Tara Jane O’Neil under the thin alias of Rhonda. In fact, in the final scene of the film, as Tara (the character) is getting arrested, the arresting officer asks if she is “Tara Jane O’Neil,” to which she answers, “yes.” When I asked Galinsky what was going on with the varying identities at play here, he simply stated, “Tara wanted to be someone else.” O’Neil likewise, when asked if it is a safe observation to say that she playfully plays with her identity not only in this performance, but in her other musical and creative identities (she often performs under the moniker of TJO) she remarked:

its a safe observation. i dont know if its true. that character, to the best of my understanding was lost and a little unproductive. a knee jerk kid.
ipm sure at some point i fit that bill, but i cant say thats where me or “TJO” is at now. [Formatting original to O’Neil.] (Helb)

Tara adds that though the film is clearly taking place in very recognizable locations with potentially recognizable people on screen, the film is not at all about Rodan or even Louisville. definitely not a document of rodan. a document of a place where these people could possibly have existed. a document of a time and some of its archetypes. but definitely not a document of the scene in louisville, or the band rodan. [formatting original to O’Neil] (Helb)

While I greatly respect O’Neil’s assertion that the film is not about Rodan or Louisville, it is difficult to argue that a disconnect exists onscreen. O’Neil’s desire for removal may be one based more on the uncomforting sight of seeing herself onscreen. As she told me, she “really
[doesn’t] recognize that person anymore.” She had, at the time of filming, just turned 21, and now, several years later, equates the film to “photo albums where you get a snapshot that gives some context to the people in it” (Helb). So, while she wants an aspect of removal between the character of Tara and the musician Tara, the film remains as a document of a period of time in which a group of musicians was asked to star as a fictional band in a fictional film in order to attempt to document a scene. The film remains one of the only documents of a period of time, a locale, and a scene under-documentated elsewhere. She adds that much of the confusing regarding *Half-Cocked* may result that most are not “in on all the jokes.”

The non-actors have fun in their depictions of non-musicians, playing with “common knowledge” and brilliantly misplaced jargon. When Sean offers to share some equipment with Truckstop, a common indie rock offer, he asks, “what kind of amps do you guys play?” The newly formed band unconfidently answers, “Zildjian. They got speakers in ‘em. [They’re] square.” The inside joke being, of course, Zildjian is one of the most famous manufacturers of cymbals (and only cymbals) and a company in possession of one of the most distinct and recognizable brand logos in modern music. In addition, *most* guitar amplifiers have speakers “in ‘em,” and very few amplifiers are, if not square, at least rectangular.

In the film, prior to a Truckstop gig, Jason Nobel as Jackson gives his longtime musical collaborator Jeff Meuller as Jeff a crash course in how to play the guitar. Jackson, it seems, has *some* knowledge of the guitar. Jeff knows nothing. Despite this, they will both be playing guitar in front of people following the lesson. Jackson holds a guitar, playing disconnected chords while repeating only partially related musical terms. Jeff points enthusiastically but aimlessly at the neck of the guitar:

JACKSON. F, F minor, B, C, C flat…
JEFF. (Repeating.) C flat.

JACKSON. … and D.

JEFF. (Pointing to the fifth fret of the guitar in Jeff’s hand.) So this one’s a G?

JACKSON. (Pointing to the top of the neck.) No, G’s way up here.

JEFF. (Pointing to the guitar’s pickups.) Okay. By these black things?

JACKSON. Yeah, I mean if you’re all distorted and stuff no one’s gonna be able to tell you can’t play.

JEFF. Okay.

Outside of the lack of a comprehensible teaching rubric, aesthetic design, or actual tuning of the guitar, the crash course is also unnecessary. Once again, the humor of the situation clearly hinges on insider musician’s knowledge. From one perspective, the act of receiving one’s sole lesson on a guitar just prior to a performance seems preposterous. From that same perspective, the music that will soon be produced as a result of this limited musical ability would likely be dismissed as aimless nonmusical cacophony. From another perspective, if it actually is “all distorted and stuff” maybe it doesn’t matter if you don’t know the correct names of the chords.

An Indie Film on a Rock Tour

As previously mentioned, Half-Cocked is the first film by director Suki Hawley and cinematographer/producer (and now-husband) Michael Galinsky. According to Galinsky, “We started dating and after about 6 months we decided to work on Half-Cocked together” (Frances). Galinsky, a North Carolinian, and Hawley, a Texan, were both located in the greater New York City area at the time of the film’s conception, but sought to shoot the film in Kentucky and Tennessee, in part because “in New York everyone is a filmmaker so it just didn’t seem as special to make a film in New York at the time.” Hawley added, “I was also interested in the film
as a document, and the music scene in New York was being pretty well documented. The explosively creative scene in Louisville wasn’t” (Frances).

If a documentary of the production of *Half-Cocked* had been made, it is likely that it would be more similar to the tour depicted in the film than a traditional feature film production. The tour *actually* occurred (in a sense), the gigs happened to some degree, and Truckstop was “real” (sort of). The entire production of *Half-Cocked*—including director Suki Hawley, cinematographer Michael Galinsky, the five non-actors portraying the non-musicians in Truckstop, and any other people needed during the weeks of shooting—was largely contained in one of two vans. The vans, like other aspects of the production, were real. One was Sleepyhead’s tour vehicle and the other “dodgy Dodge van” was the van “Crain used to tool around the States.” (George) When one van was on camera, the other van acted as a mobile production unit. When the other van was on camera, the roles were switched. One can imagine that the plot addition of Sean kindly offering his legal van in exchange for Truckstop’s stolen van was based in part on the fact that they had two vans to work with. Just as the people involved in the production and the shooting locations acted in dual (or tripled) roles, the vans too had to serve more than one purpose.

When it came time to release and distribute the film, Galinsky and Hawley once again did not venture very far from their comfort zones. Rather than screening the film at film festivals and seeking an orthodox distribution deal, they set up a “traveling film festival” to screen the film like it was an indie rock show rather than a feature film. Using the same van featured in the film, the filmmakers traveled to the same clubs in which the film was shot and screened the film in the same local scenes that had provided cultural and physical backdrops, extras, and inspiration. The film was dubbed and marketed as the “Indie-Rock Road Movie,” an increasingly
meaningful and powerful sentiment since, by 1995, the term “indie rock” was being co-opted by the mainstream music industry. Despite this, no product of non-indie rock media could claim such “authentic” embeddedness as *Half-Cocked* which, by choice or design, not only featured a narrative related to the indie rock underground and was shown within an “authentic scene,” but also sought acceptance from the actual scenes by way of taking the film back to the clubs.

Galinsky and Hawley formed an improv band to “relieve the boredom of touring” and opened for the film. The band, The Half-Cocked Band, featured Hawley, Galinsky, and a revolving cast of friends including $2 Guitar’s Tim Foljahn. As Galinsky interpreted the situation, they were “unintentionally mimicking the movie they had made” (“Lost in Spain”). By their own account, they screened the film in hundreds of clubs and bars in the United States.

After successfully screening the film in the United States for several months, the prospect of screening the film in Europe in a similar fashion was raised. Once again, Galinsky and Hawley formed an improvisational band in the vein of (if not in the style of) Truckstop and traveled to Europe with the film. In this incarnation of their traveling film festival, the filmmakers brought along Boston-based indie rock band Come, with whom Sean Meadows was now playing. Come, unlike Rodan, had some longevity. They had a near-decade long history together (including several years in other bands before Come formed), a relatively large discography, and years of touring experience. If Truckstop (and Rodan for that matter) were naïve and young to the point that they were brilliant because, among other things, they didn’t know any better, Come was a grizzled, outspoken, abrasive, and road-weary group led by Thalia Zedek. The group seemed as suited for the screen as the quiet and introspective members of Rodan, so Galinsky and Hawley decided to make another film while traveling with *Half-Cocked* and Come.
According to a joking Galinsky, the acts of just screening the film and playing in the opening band while on the road left him bored. He needed something to do. In “Lost in Spain,” a making-of short included on the *Half-Cocked/Radiation* DVD, Hawley laughs nervously at this statement. She adds that she believed that they were really doing too much this time: “we’re trying to shoot a feature, follow a film festival, and do a rock tour in Spain [laughs].” With *Radiation* (1998), Galinsky and Hawley attempt a variation of the formula that produced *Half-Cocked*. Once again, using actual musicians on an actual tour playing actual gigs to actual audience members, the filmmakers shot another movie while touring in support of *Half-Cocked*.

“*Radiation*, like *Half-Cocked*, stars musicians and people involved in the underground rock world basically playing themselves. While it isn’t a documentary, it’s kind of a document, a film that tries to capture the essence of what it's like to tour/live in that environment” (Frances).

As with *Half-Cocked*, Galinsky and Hawley feared their own proximity to their subjects and actively avoided shooting a documentary in favor of shooting another fictional film. *Radiation* follows a short European tour of American band Come and a bizarre (not very good) performance artist (also American) named Mary (Katy Petty). Tour manager/promoter Unai (Jnai Fresno) specializes in bringing American bands to Europe to play gigs. He brought Come; Mary just sort of showed up. Unfortunately Unai’s tours don’t do too well, so he has to sell speed on the road in order to pay his bands and finance the tour. In regards to Fresno, his character is “who he is for the most part,” explains Galinsky, “instead of having to have people to stretch and create a role, it’s kind of really just documenting their lives.” Scenes featuring Jnai in business dealings could easily become scenes of Unai’s dealings. Even his character’s name, Unai, is only slightly different from his real name, Jnai, (both are pronounced “Oo-neye”) so as to not make the “reality” surrounding the production too weird amid production. We can (hopefully) assume
that Jnai was not selling speed as Unai was. I would also like to assume that Jnai was far more adept at his job.

The released version of *Radiation* is now included on the *Half-Cocked: 10th Anniversary Edition* DVD. The film is interesting when viewed, like an Elaine May film, with extensive knowledge of the culture and production surrounding the film and its long lineage. In addition to containing brilliantly photographed scenes of Come’s performances, the Spanish countryside, and a rare early performance by British electro-pop band Stereolab, the film, like *Half-Cocked* before it, is also an interesting example of this particular style of guerilla filmmaking. Though the terms independent, independence, and indie are used in marketing campaigns, genre-reliant descriptive passages, and proud and boastful claims of authenticity, rare is the media product—specifically in pre-Internet “indie culture”—that can honestly claim such independence.

Conclusion

Inherent to my claims that such a film—an “authentic” fabricated fiction—can achieve a level of perceived authenticity despite the fact that it is openly *inauthentic*, is a notion that fact is not necessarily a prerequisite for authentic representation. In fact, as is the case with *Half-Cocked*, the presentation of a fictional narrative was seen as being a conduit through which the filmmakers could deliver a more authentic picture, not necessarily of an actual band, but of a representative type of band. Thereby, Galinsky and Hawley were able to deliver a truer document of the scene they hoped to capture than if it was a factual documentary. Likewise, clearly the members of Rodan or their associated bands probably never stole another band’s van full of equipment, but the situations, events, and environments surrounding the outlandish tour by Truckstop are more authentic than the corporatized images of slacker alternative rockers portrayed in *Singles* and *Reality Bites*. 
Both *Singles* and *Reality Bites*, with their inclusion of grunge musician or lovable-but-troubled alternative slacker characters (both widely recognized and depicted by mainstream media by the times of the films’ respective releases) are intended for a more widespread consumption. Contrarily, *Half-Cocked* is likely to be misunderstood, dismissed, or generally disliked by a large percentage of the potential commercial audience, based on the narrative material (regional, small-scale, independent music and amateur musicianship), production (very low cost, low resource filmmaking), and performance (both the acting and the music). It was an authentic picture of the type of touring done by the bands depicted in the film because it was shot following those specific bands, or extremely similar surrogates. Aspects of the filmmakers’ insider knowledge of the world of indie music and semiprofessional touring are evident in several scenes of the film. In a sense, they achieved an authentic depiction of nonmusicians-turned-band, reliant upon the firsthand knowledge, the production’s closeness to its subject, and the documentary-like style of production, despite the fact that their subject is fictional. The production’s methods and identities are crucial to the aspects of the film that work so well (at least for the people for whom this work was intended). The production being more akin to a band on the road than a recreation of a band on the road adds to the authenticity surrounding the film. Hawley explained in 2003, “*Half-Cocked* [is] about the indie music world, and starred members of actual bands playing versions of themselves. So, in a sense, they were documents of that time and place, if not documentaries” (Shady).

With *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*, the sheer incompatibility of the intentions of the narrative (commercial success is secondary to integrity and authenticity) and the necessity for a product in the commercial film industry to make money (thereby favoring commercial success over all else) may have prevented the film from A) being properly produced
in the spirit of the author’s original intention and B) being commercially unreleased for so long. Likewise, the intentions of *Ishtar’s* filmmakers at providing sardonic commentary on apparatuses for those products deemed professionally successful created opportunity as a public scolding of the director. In contrast, the success of *Half-Cocked* at largely authentic representation of the struggles of an unknown band of musicians—not in the derogatory *bowels* of the mediated commercial industry, but in the credibility-inducing *trenches* of underground and independent music—may be earned simply because it was largely made outside the Industry.

The actors are just the musicians, or the type of musicians, depicted in the film; much like the presence of former members of the Sex Pistols in *The Looters* in *Ladies and Gentlemen*, but quite different than the hugely successful Hoffman and Beatty playing such lowly unsuccessful types in *Ishtar*. The resulting film is grimier and more raw than the polished Hollywood productions of *Ishtar* and *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*. Even though both films were deemed *bad films*, they were still “professionally produced” films. *Half-Cocked* is made more like a jam session in a basement of an over-populated house of rock and roll, made between school and work. It achieves by necessity a lot of what far-more-expensive films struggle to achieve in its “*indie aesthetic*” of black and white, long hand-held shots, and conversational dialog. In its superior accomplishment of this, it is likely excluding many from finding enjoyment, let alone importance, in the film, but it, like the music genre and scene being depicted in the film, is well presented and, dare I say, “authentic.”
CHAPTER IV. HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH: (EN)GENDERED PROFESSIONALISM AND (TRANS)GENDERED AMATEURISM

In the opening number of the film version of Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001), in front of intentionally crude animation projected onto a wrinkled white sheet, Yitzhak (Miriam Shor)—Hedwig’s (John Cameron Mitchell) “man Friday through Thursday”—provides philosophical and historical exposition to a crowd of diners visibly aghast at the performers standing on the other side of a salad bar from them. Yitzhak orates:

On August 13th, 1961, a wall was erected down the middle of the city of Berlin. The world was divided by a cold war and the Berlin Wall was the most hated symbol of that divide. Reviled, graffitied, spit upon. We thought the wall would stand forever. And now that it’s gone, we don’t know who we are anymore. Ladies and gentlemen, Hedwig is like that wall, standing before you in a divide between East and West, slavery and freedom, man and woman, top and bottom.

Hedwig and her band, the Angry Inch, also represent an embodiment of the “divide” (that is the liminal space) between professionalism and amateurism. They are clearly not amateurs. They are fully capable, even excellent musicians, but their production (white sheets for screens) and space of performance (partially obscured by a “bottomless” salad bar) seem to mark them as being far from professional. Similarly, Hedwig and the Angry Inch represents a space between film, rock music, and musical theater. The process of the film’s creation—from its initial conceptual birth to the process of fabrication, refinement, and development of its characters, story, and music—inform the narrative and its resulting culture to a degree that most lines of distinction between the real and the fabricated are as blurred as Hedwig’s many lines. But, like Hedwig, there has been little protection of a professional façade. Taking cues from the drag
community that first served creators John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask as a working laboratory, the duo created in *Hedwig* a rich and multilayered narrative that challenges norms and taboos of gender, sexuality, nationality, and authenticity, but also has created a culture that continued beyond final curtain, closing credits, and the last song on the album. Perhaps this is because *Hedwig* does so much so well.

*Hedwig* is a “breathtakingly original musical [...] about survival through self-reincarnation, centered on a character who, in concert with her ragtag rock band, the Angry Inch, describes herself as harder to tear down than the Berlin Wall” (Brantley). *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is really several stories presented under the cover of a singular film using the metaphorical amateur-professional musician relationship. Beyond that, the film’s structural “basic” become rather complex. Within each layer of identity, notions of divide, between-ness, and liminality are reinforced.

At its most basic, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is the story of a transgender songwriter/performer who is seeking redemption. She wants recognition for authoring songs claimed by current rock sensation Tommy Gnosis (Michael Pitt), who, like his songs, is also Hedwig’s creation. Hedwig and the Angry Inch’s tour is shadowing Tommy’s tour. The professional tour is a nationwide tour of arenas and stadiums. The Angry Inch’s gigs take place in one of the franchises of a struggling restaurant chain called Bildgewater’s. The goal of Hedwig and manager Phyllis (Andrea Martin) is to get close enough to Tommy to capture a photograph of Tommy and Hedwig together, thereby fueling the already existent tabloid scandal surrounding Tommy and his “transsexual lover” and proving Hedwig to be the authentic creator of Tommy Gnosis. While it is all true, Tommy denies it and seems to resent Hedwig since he fled their creative and romantic relationship following his discovery of her “angry inch.”
As with the previous chapters, in this chapter, we will explore the narrative of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* along with elements of the film’s creation and production and its lasting influence. In many ways, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* represents a culmination of several aspects previously discussed in earlier chapters. Like *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*, the artifice of mediation and its relationship to professional success and fame is of the utmost importance to the relationship between the “authentic Hedwig” and the “inauthentic Tommy.” Like in *Ishtar*, the space of professional, semiprofessional, and amateur musical performances (ranging from sports stadiums to a chain of seafood restaurants) is used to further emphasize the distance between professionalism and amateurism. And finally, like *Half-Cocked*, the “authentic production” of the film allows for a lasting importance and “authenticity” despite the fabricated nature of the narrative. Like *Ishtar’s* Rogers & Clarke, Hedwig and the Angry Inch are in the “dregs” of the music industry. Like both *Ishtar* and *Ladies and Gentlemen*, it is only by way of an attempt to reappropriate media or hegemonic exploitation that an otherwise commercially undesirable amateur is able to rise to any rank of semiprofessionalism and media attention. Unlike Rogers & Clarke though, Hedwig and the Angry Inch are good; better, in fact, than their professional counterpart.

**How “Some Slip of a Girlie Boy” Became Hedwig**

In front of a projected image of a tabloid cover, Hedwig explains to a disinterested audience that she has recently been exposed as the “gay transsexual lover” of famous rock star Tommy Gnosis. The Bildgewater’s patrons are powerless to ignore the amplified East German voice. Seemingly disinterested, they nonetheless remain in their seats, subjecting themselves to her rants. She tells them she is also the author of “every song on that album” by the current “number one” Tommy Gnosis. She explains further:
How did some slip of a girly boy from Communist East Berlin become the internationally ignored song stylist barely standing before you? That’s what I want to talk about tonight, ladies and gentlemen. I don’t wanna talk about sudden, undeserved commercial success. (Motioning to projected images of Tommy Gnosis behind her.) I don’t wanna talk about betrayal, I don’t wanna talk about my lawsuit against a certain rock and roll “icon,” Tommy Gnosis, who, by some freak coincidence, is performing right next door at Busch Stadium. And to whom I taught everything he knows, and has apparently forgotten, about rock and roll!

The joke, of course, is that her complaining about not wanting to talk about it, as if she had been pestered by some unseen entity to speak of such things against her will, negates her projected desire to not talk about such things. Hedwig wants very much to talk of such things and to be heard.

The Angry Inch’s tour is following Tommy Gnosis’s tour, but is in no way officially or professionally associated with it. Hedwig and the Angry Inch perform figuratively in the shadows of Tommy Gnosis. So close are they in fact, that when Hedwig opens the door to announce Tommy’s proximity, rather than being just for dramatic effect, the volume of Tommy’s concert overpowers any noise being made at Bilgewater’s. Band manager Phyllis, explains to the band (a hodgepodge of purposefully vague Eastern European stereotypes led musically by Skszp, portrayed by Hedwig composer Stephen Trask) if it’s a travel day for Tommy, it is a travel day for The Angry Inch. When Tommy plays Chicago’s Soldier Field, the Angry Inch will be “down the street” at the Chicago Bildgewater’s.

Phyllis secured a deal to book the Angry Inch at any Bildgewater’s restaurant (a maritime-disaster-themed seafood franchise) nationwide despite rumors that the “entire chain’s
going under.” In fact, if the business had been doing well, it is likely that the chain would be disinterested in The Angry Inch’s tour. It is, for the unseen person or people who Phyllis deals with, a publicity stunt in hopes of capitalizing on Hedwig’s claims regarding superstar Tommy Gnosis. The space of performance, in a cramped corner of a room ill-prepared for or desirous of music played at such a volume, is less than ideal. But the situation, in which Hedwig can be as close to Tommy without seeming too suspicious, is extremely ideal. In order to capture a photograph of Tommy—currently embroiled in his first major tabloid scandal—and Hedwig—the object and possibly initial informant of said tabloid scandal—she must remain as close as possible. It is quite possible the entire scandal is a result of Hedwig’s orchestration.

Hedwig’s life began as Hansel Schmidt, son of an East Berlin woman and a long-gone American GI. Piece by piece, her story comes together by way of between-song stage banter, lyrical narration, and flashbacks. One such flashback shows a nude Hansel sunbathing while lying on his stomach when Army Sgt. Robinson (Maurice Dean Wint) approaches him. Sgt. Robinson falls in love with Hansel and offers to take him to America with him but, noting Army regulations regarding homosexual relationships, tells Hansel that he will “have to leave something behind.” A botched sex change operation leaves, in place of where his “vagina never was,” where his “penis used to be,” an “angry inch” of genitalia. Hansel, now Hedwig, is with neither a penis nor a vagina. Caught between the male Hansel and the newly feminized Hedwig, she travels to the United States as Sgt. Robinson’s new foreign bride. It is because of the operation that Robinson is able to call her his wife and take her to the United States, but it is possibly because of the “one inch mound of flesh” left by the operation that Robinson abandons Hedwig in a Junction City, Kansas trailer park to fend for herself.
The character of Hedwig is based, at least in its primordial stage, on a woman who would allow John Cameron Mitchell and his friends to hang out at her home during the time his own military family spent in Junction City, Kansas. The woman Helga, a German woman estranged from her American military husband, lived in a trailer park and supported herself through prostitution. “Helga [...] babysat his younger brother [and] Mitchell hung out in Helga’s trailer, listening to music and drinking beers. ‘She kept having these dates, but she never knew what they were going to look like,’ Mitchell recalls. Years later, he realized she was a prostitute” (McDonnell). When Mitchell conveyed the story to him, Trask thought that it would be wonderful to imagine the character as a struggling musician who had (at one time, but now long forgotten) been an integral part in the development of a famous rock star. The spilt between them (the forgotten authentic amateur and the praised inauthentic professional) is represented, among several other ways, by song. Within the film, the song “Wicked Little Town” is presented as a collaboration between Tommy and Hedwig and, when sung together, it is about them both getting out of the “wicked little town.” In separate performances of the song, it becomes about how he (Tommy) got “out,” but she (Hedwig) did not. The two versions of the song have two distinctly different meanings because she is singing the song from within the “wicked little town” (or a metaphorical surrogate for the town) and Tommy is performing the song out of the “wicked little town,” on the professional stage, despite being less deserving. “When you’re a musician,” Trask relates, “and your friends get signed [to a record deal], people you hung out with or whatever get signed, and they go off, and you used to be in a band together [...] you can’t help but be jealous. That part comes from me” (Nix).

Hedwig’s dual identity follows her from birth. As she was born a he, the Berlin wall was erected forcing most to flee westward, but Hedwig’s mother moved east since the Communists
gave her a job “teaching sculpture to limbless children.” Hedwig found solace in listening to American GI radio while playing in the oven, since the apartment was too small to provide ample space for play elsewhere.

Late at night, I would listen to the voices of the American masters: Toni Tenille [of Captain & Tenille], Debby Boone, Anne Murray—who was actually a Canadian, working in the American idiom. And then there were the crypto-homo rockers: Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, David Bowie—who was actually an idiom working in America and Canada. These artists, they left as deep an impression on me as that oven rack did on my face. To be a young American in muskrat love [referencing “Muskrat Love,” likely the Captain & Tenille 1976 version], soft as an easy chair [referencing “Evergreen” (1976) by Barbra Streisand], not even the chair, “I am,” I said [referencing “I Am… I Said” (1971) by Neil Diamond].

“Have I never been mellow?” [referencing Olivia Newton John’s “Have You Never Been Mellow” (1975)] And the colored girls sing… [referencing Lou Reed’s 1972 song “Walk on the Wild Side”].

Hedwig positions herself in a particular and peculiar position within popular culture, queer culture, and world culture. She is able to place herself within a largely critically accepted list of progressive artists when she names The Velvet Underground’s Lou Reed, The Stooges’s Iggy Pop, and David Bowie specifically by name. Slightly less widely accepted as worthwhile influences are found in her listing of largely dismissible pop musicians Tenille, Anne Murray, and Debby Boone, the latter of whom may only appear lower than her own father, the vilified Pat Boone, on any number of who’s who of cool lists. But it is specifically her listing of thinly veiled allusions to Barbra Streisand, Neil Diamond, and Olivia Newton John that places Hedwig as
openly derivative and a holder of popular music knowledge beyond mere name-dropping. Hedwig’s position as a queer child, obsessed with Western popular music while living behind the Iron Curtain, is intensified and made all the more uncomfortable by her only manner of Western cultural consumption: by way of a military-funded radio station. She, as a young male, lies expressionless with his head in the oven listening to a transistor radio, adding to the unorthodox, potentially uncomfortable and dangerous nature of her childhood. As Hedwig is interchangeably depicted as the male child being described in the monologue and the adult woman delivering the monologue, the liminal existence of Hedwig is furthered. Similarly, though Hedwig is concerned with professional success and the commercial and cultural products of professional music, 

_Hedwig and the Angry Inch_, according to Judith A. Peraino, “harbors an antiassimilationist message via its critique of gender identity” (251).

Hedwig is the underappreciated authentic alternative to Tommy Gnosis’s inauthentic popularity. Hedwig, just as Helga had done for Mitchell’s parents, “sat for the baby of General Speck.” The “other son was […] the artist formerly known [as...] Tommy Speck.” Before Hedwig began Tommy’s transformation to Tommy Gnosis, Tommy Speck was “a seventeen-year-old, classic rock-loving, _Dungeons-and-Dragons_-obsessed Jesus freak with a fish on his truck.” Hedwig’s exposure of Tommy Gnosis as actually being Tommy Speck is the basis for undermining the popularity of Tommy Gnosis by casting a judgment of inauthenticity. Despite Tommy’s popularity and fame (since he is exposed as being essentially Hedwig’s creation, void of any substance that is not actually Hedwig’s), Hedwig attempts to defame and normalize the rock star, while also defending her own perceived infatuation with Tommy as justifiable and authentic. In contrast to Tommy’s state of inauthentic professionalism, Hedwig’s own journey to semiprofessionalism is highly authentic despite obvious issues such as her “alteration” of her
“natural” state and proud allegiance to other fabricated personae of pop and rock. In essence, where Tommy is presented as fake despite his popularity and success, Hedwig is presented as real despite her lack of popularity and success.

After her arrival in the United States, Hedwig formed an all-girl rock group fronting a band of Korean sergeants’ wives. Like Hedwig and her mother before her, the other women in her band have been collected, like souvenirs brought home from foreign lands only to be Americanized, neglected, and ignored. In an unsupportive performance environment, Hedwig is shown introducing her band following a song, pausing to allow a patron to pass through the “stage” area en route from the bathroom located behind the band to the audience space located in front. The location of Hedwig’s performance is of the utmost importance as the suspension of reality and normalcy of performance is interrupted by the daily necessities of human existence (e.g., using the bathroom). The band acts as more of a hindrance, literally blocking the path between the patrons and the restrooms.

Hedwig’s spaces of performance—a café with the Korean sergeants’ wives, the various Bildgewater’s Restaurants, and even her marginal inclusion in Menses Fair (a women’s music festival)—are presented, much the same as in Ishtar, as spaces unintended for performance. Diners sit, oriented not towards the band or the roving, wireless-microphoned Hedwig, but towards their menus, towards the camera, in conversation, or elsewhere. In some performances, smatterings of fans (denoted by their general interest, familiarity with the material, and/or the adornment of a large, yellow styrofoam wig hat) join the disinterested diners. They are largely in the minority. Between the camera’s gaze and the Angry Inch, as in Ishtar, tokens of amateur/nonprofessional performance space are presented, lessening the performance to a level of less than primary focus (made all the more interesting when viewed in conjunction with the
“intrusiveness” of the performance to the diners’ meals). Tables, waitstaff, and a salad bar—being perused by clientele, the band (who serve themselves desert between songs), and restocked by staff—occupy the space between Hedwig and the camera. Hedwig often ventures beyond these obstacles, blurring the lines of performance and audience as well as between performance space and dining. Less than cordially, she stands atop tables, sings into people’s faces, and sexualizes the interaction between audience and performer. She makes a stage of the food servers’ carts by riding them and using the waitstaff as her play’s company. If the marginal amateur is forced to make a performance space out of an otherwise primarily focused location, Hedwig chooses to embrace this awkward condition by further blurring the lines rather than cowering in a corner behind the buffet salad bar. Unlike Ishtar’s Rogers and Clarke who are unnerved by the normal business of the restaurants they perform in, Hedwig and the Angry Inch disrupt the normality.

All the while, Hedwig advances her story by way of her songs and exposition—providing banter. At times the tales sound like the unbelievable rantings of a lunatic (and they very likely may be), but to dismiss any one song as such is to potentially miss a major part of the story. For example, none of the songs are as important to Hedwig’s identity as “The Origin of Love,” for in its lyrics is the key to Hedwig’s duality and her quest. The listener may find the song innocuous enough upon first exposure or pretentious enough upon discovering its appropriation of Greek (and other) mythology, but to leave the analysis there is to miss much of the brilliance of its relevance to Hedwig. “The Origin of Love” was actually the first song Stephen Trask composed for Hedwig. The song is based on Aristophanes’s speech as contained in Plato’s Symposium. Aristophanes proposes that initially “sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in
number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two.” Benjamin Jowett’s translation continues:

Primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and the same number of feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely alike; also four ears, two privy members, and the remainder to correspond. He could walk upright as men now do, backwards or forwards as he pleased, and he could also roll over and over at a great pace, turning on his four hands and four feet, eight in all, like tumblers going over and over with their legs in the air.

According to Trask’s lyrics, which take certain poetic licenses, after the gods began to fear the “strength and defiance” of humans, Zeus appeased Thor’s desire to “kill them all with [his] hammer,” by proposing he “split them right down the middle [and] cut them right up in half” thereby creating two, far more easy to manage, genders. Love, Aristophanes suggests, is the now-halved human being searching for his/her now severed other half. Once that half is found, Trask writes, the two halves “[wrap their] arms around each other, trying to shove [themselves] back together.” Hedwig, according to Mitchell’s understanding, is a “walking metaphor for this myth” because she is an embodiment of the fact that no matter how hard the two halves try to reunite themselves, they will “never truly reunite” (Nix). Her other half is Tommy; the most important “other half” of all the men in her life (including ex-husband Sgt. Robinson and current husband Yitzhak). Tommy’s male sexuality, while still strongly androgynous, mirrors Hedwig’s androgynous female sexuality. The fact that the passably heterosexual male Tommy performs Hedwig’s songs in a more professional environment to the acclaim of thousands of fans while Hedwig (an unacceptably-gendered individual) performs the songs to rooms of largely
disinterested attendees (despite being the more “authentic” half of the Tommy-Hedwig completed whole) confounds the professional-amateur relationship.

During the song “Angry Inch,” Hedwig describes the details of her botched surgery and the origins of the band’s name. “Angry Inch” is performed at Bildgewater’s Baltimore. This is a very different Angry Inch in the sense the band is more punk, more glam. If nothing else, this accentuates the skilled genre-crossing of Hedwig, which is not found in the other films of the previous chapters. Possibly based in the more fantasy-laden story, for the purposes of this project, it also adds to the notion of the liminal space of Hedwig (the character) and Hedwig (the film). Hedwig wears a cut-off, sleeveless t-shirt upon which “Rock n Roll” appears with garish animal print pants. She is both mockery and disciple of the “crypto-homo rockers” she idolizes. The music, much like Hedwig’s outfit, is the more punk, more glam spectrum of The Angry Inch’s music. During the instrumental introduction, Yitzhak and Hedwig exchange staged punches as if to psych one another up for what is one of, if not the, most high-energy and intensive songs. The blurred excitement between sexual expression, athleticism, and energized performance continues throughout the song as Hedwig taunts the disinterested patrons, body checks Yitzhak and anyone else within her space of performance, and calls to arms her loyal followers for the inevitable confrontation beginning to brew in the room. “My sex change operation got botched!” she exclaims.

The audience appears to be a more even mix of both disinterested dining patrons and loyal “Hed-heads” (fans of the Angry Inch), but this is only because, spawned by the high energy and spirited nature of the song, the minority of fans has become something akin to mediated images of early Beatles audiences: sexualized and energized, emotionally and physically unable to stay quiet or still. Even Phyllis seems inspired by the song as she dances stridently. The band,
no longer “contained” behind the salad bar nor separated either from one another or the dining audience, has, much like its music in this instance, taken over the room. In front of a backdrop of aquariums and differently colored lights, the band has all but completely altered the restaurant space into a performance space for the first time in the film. The fans cheer and scream, singing along. Certain fans have reappeared from earlier venues, possibly signaling that the band is gaining “a following.”

Hedwig prances as if possessed, simultaneously angry and elated. For those in attendance applauding the performance, Hedwig rewards. For those unfortunate attendees who seem to only be attempting to enjoy their meals, Hedwig engages in a part-sexual, part-confrontational, literally in-your-face forcing of herself on them in spite of their disinterest and open discomfort with the situation. The humor is not lost that despite the less than relaxing meal clearly available to them in such a situation, they remain seated, to be verbally, musically, and emotionally accosted by Hedwig and The Angry Inch. By the time the second occurrence of the anthemic chorus of “Angry Inch” comes around, even some older patrons have become converts, smiling, bopping rhythmically, and wearing Hedwig wigs. Hedwig digresses to provide a detailed narrative:

When I woke up from the operation, I was bleeding down there. I was bleeding from the gash between my legs. It’s my first day as a woman; already it’s that time of the month. But two days later, the hole closed up. The wound healed and I was left with a one-inch mound of flesh. Where my penis used to be, where my vagina never was. It was a one-inch mound of flesh with a scar running down it like a sideways grimace on an eyeless face.
This confessional is seemingly too much. An employee of Bildgewater’s seems to argue with Phyllis. With Hedwig’s detailed description of the surgery, a dining patron is finally motivated to violent reaction. “Faggot!” he exclaims towards Hedwig. Hedwig continues, not so much unfazed, but energized by the outburst. Yitzhak leaps from the “stage” to defend Hedwig, followed one by one by the other members of the band. As the song builds to a climax, the entire room has entered the melee. Wigged fans fight with the straights as Hedwig performs. As the song comes to a close, Hedwig, apparently entering a state of introspection, leaves the vicinity of the microphone and looks out over her creation. The riot, like Tommy before it, though entirely of her own design, is no longer in her control. The song, the band, the performer, the persona, the experience has created a riot. Hedwig leaves not only the microphone and the performance, but also the space of performance, the riot, the present, and reality.

The Angry Inch disbands. Yitzhak gets the role of Angel in the “Broadway Cruise's Polynesian Tour of Rent” (mimicking Ishtar’s Rogers and Clarke’s need to leave the Western world to achieve success) and Hedwig is left to prostitute. Tommy, not necessarily looking for this transgender prostitute, but possibly looking for any transgender prostitute, finds a more classically female Hedwig (akin to her appearance in the couple’s early days), though as viewed through a sense of garish whorishness. The two drive around town listening and singing along to Tommy’s latest hit, “The Origin of Love.” In an attempt at reconciliation, Tommy adds Hedwig’s name to his with a marker denoting recognition of shared authorship. After their car crashes, an additional tabloid scandal erupts when the two are arrested together. Tommy, once again, denies Hedwig. Hedwig, once again, capitalizes on the press with appearances on television programs such as Rosie O’Donnell and magazine covers such as Time Out New York.
The Angry Inch, now reformed, return to Bildgewater’s. This time it is Bildgewater’s Times Square and its resoundingly appreciative audience.

Hedwig begins the performance of a confessional ballad entitled “Hedwig’s Lament,” but, like “Angry Inch” before it, the songs erupts into a violent display of destruction, flashbacks, and auditory onslaught in its transition to “Exquisite Corpse.” The musical violence of “Exquisite Corpse” dwarfs the violent reaction triggered by “Angry Inch” if for no other reason than it seems to be driving the performance rather than disrupting it. The audience looks on in stunned shock as the songs builds to a series of unresolved crescendos. Still in a state of seemingly perpetual building without resolution, Hedwig grabs for the neck of a Gibson Flying V, smashing it into an amplifier in a manner than might make Pete Townsend jealous, and begins to remove the “artifice” surrounding her. She removes her wig. She removes her corset, exposing her surrogate breasts as tomatoes (an allusion to the “salad” she made when pelted with tomatoes at an early performance). The destruction is intermittently interpolated with scenes of an off-key Tommy Gnosis singing response lyrics. He sings from a fantasy location, not necessarily within Bildgewater’s or Hedwig’s realm of reality.

As the song comes to a close, Tommy’s performance dominates. We are no longer in Bildgewater’s, but in a darkened performance space void of band, stage, form, or audience. Hedwig approaches Tommy as a more masculine, more Hansel, more Tommy Gnosis version of himself/herself. This space seems a representation of the liminal space between Tommy and Hedwig, male and female, professional and amateur, and real and fantasy. Tommy Gnosis leaves the microphone to approach Hedwig before disappearing into the darkness. When the song closes, the space is dominated by a white backdrop in which the members of The Angry Inch now stand, poised ready to play, staring at a shirtless male Hedwig. The audience too is fixated
silently upon Hedwig. A highly stylized, highly “professional” backdrop of sinking ships is raised behind them and Bildgewater’s is transformed into an equally stylized performance space. Hedwig has become Tommy Gnosis or Tommy has been absorbed by Hedwig, his other half. On his forehead, a silver cross has been painted in the same style Hedwig first painted upon Tommy Speck’s forehead, concretizing the transformation from Speck to Gnosis.

Hedwig turns to assess the band before locking her gaze on a seemingly stunned Yitzhak. Hedwig silently nods to Skszp, signaling the opening chords of “Midnight Radio.” Hedwig picks up the cast-aside blonde wig synonymous with her performance and hands it to Yitzhak. When Yitzhak attempts to place the wig on the singing Hedwig, he is rejected. Yitzhak climbs on top of a speaker, places the wig upon his head, and falls backwards in a leap of faith into the awaiting audience. The crowd catches a now-female Yitzhak and she is passed from person to person surfing atop the crowd. Whereas Hedwig’s transformation into Tommy Gnosis is still flavored with the androgyny inherent to Tommy, Yitzhak’s transformation is strongly female. Identities of dominating artifice have been traded among the major players. Yitzhak’s maleness has been replaced with a female drag (though the character is being portrayed by a woman). Hedwig’s creation, Tommy, has been absorbed. Tommy as a separate persona seems to have been destroyed and simultaneously consumed by Hedwig. Even the space of performance has been made more professional and less amateurish.

From the Clubs to Off Broadway to Film Production

Stephen Trask and John Cameron Mitchell met on a flight to New York when Trask “tested the waters” by placing a copy of a biography of New German Cinema director Rainer Werner Fassbinder on the seat between them. According to Trask, Mitchell asked if he was a filmmaker and Trask said, “‘No, I’m a musician. Are you in film?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I’m an
actor” (Nix). At the time, Stephen Trask was playing gigs around New York City with his band, Cheater. Trask began Cheater with the intention of creating a sort of “arty-queer-punk” aesthetic, but, according to Cheater bass player Jack Steeb, Trask would also write “these great kind of piano ballads that was [sic.] completely out-of-line with the [the previous] song.” Mitchell, after seeing the band at CBGB’s, was struck with Trask’s ability to “genre hop” from song to song and presented him with concepts he had for a “rock theatre” piece. Mitchell was interested in creating a rock opera of sorts, “particularly one that would involve a real band.” Trask found the prospect of marrying his rock music to theater intriguing. The story initially focused on the character of Tommy Gnosis, not Hedwig. The two imagined Tommy as a pop star and “the story [would explore] his lovers. John [Cameron Mitchell] and Stephen [Trask] then came up with the idea of Hedwig as a drag character who would be one of the lovers” (heduginabox.com). “In its earliest incarnations, the piece was about a male rock star [who would develop into the character of Tommy]. Hedwig was a secondary character” (Lyman).

In 1994, Cheater began playing the Squeezebox parties at a New York City rock club called Don Hill’s. Trask acted as the events’ musical director. The concept behind the event was “drag queens dumping the lipsynching routine to sing rock and roll live onstage” (myspace.com/squeezeboxmovie). Squeezebox hostess Mistress Formika describes the nights as a “sanctuary for those of us who were gay but loved rock and roll [and] didn’t necessarily need to go to a club with all gay people” (Nix). Cheater was the house band for the parties. The events were part drag show/part karaoke with a live band. Unlike more “traditional” drag performances, repertoires of disco, vocal standards, Broadway, and pop, were replaced with rock and roll and the act of lip-syncing was replaced with actual singing. Cheater would play the music and a who’s-who of local drag superstars and celebrity “guests” including Courtney Love and Debbie
Harry of Blondie would sing. The performers were notoriously critical of each other. According to Wollman, the “tough audience of drag queen regulars […] were notoriously icy to newcomers” (182). Trask suggested to Mitchell that he do a performance with Cheater at one of the Squeezebox nights, but only if he did “the woman” (the character that would evolve into Hedwig) because it was a drag night. Mitchell was not a regular drag performer, nor did he live any portion of his life as a woman. In fact, Mitchell’s first performance as Hedwig on July 29, 1994 was his first time in drag (Nix). Mitchell may have been seen as “slumming it” by performing at the club, having already appeared in several Broadway productions, films and television programs. In addition, unlike Squeezebox’s regular performers who performed one or two unrelated covers of well-known rock and roll songs, Mitchell’s performance (“raw and amazing” according to Formika) included a surprisingly detailed and already developed backstory of Hedwig’s journey from Communist East Berlin to a Midwest trailer park. In addition to original material, Trask and Mitchell brought with their character the swagger of a repeatedly ignored but self-convinced genius performing in a venue lucky to have her. Squeezebox promoter Michael Schmidt admits he wasn’t “accustomed to thinking this way,” in regards to the drag character possessing a life and history beyond the performance. As Mitchell filled the space between the autobiographical songs with anecdotal narratives, Hedwig’s story was able to grow, be refined, and develop into the play (Nix). Over time, “Mitchell developed the Hedwig character while Trask wrote the music and lyrics. Rather than workshop their production in a traditional manner, they honed their project at Squeezebox” (Wollman 182).

Initially suspicious that Mitchell may be using them, the community eventually grew to accept and embrace Mitchell’s unorthodox take on drag performance with Hedwig. Never straight drag in a traditional sense, from the start the guise of drag was purposefully
deconstructed amid the performance as he would “rip the drag off” at some point mid
performance (similar to the “de-dragging” depicted in “Midnight Radio”). Schmidt ponders: “I
think some of the [drag] queens felt they were being taken advantage of in that John [Cameron
Mitchell] was utilizing [the Squeezebox performances] to workshop an idea of his, that they
didn’t fully understand” (Nix). Furthermore, though Mitchell may have been an active
participant in New York City’s gay social scene at the time, he was already an award winning
and widely acknowledged actor. Mitchell’s performances as Hedwig could be seen as making
light of the legitimacy that many drag performers and transgender individuals strove for. That
Mitchell was openly “putting” on the costume of Hedwig for the performance, only to remove it
following the performance and a return to “reality,” was potentially detrimental to Mitchell and
Hedwig’s acceptance within the community. Mitchell sought to gain complete acceptance by
further paying his dues, continuing to perform often, on occasion hosting Squeezebox, and
otherwise embedding himself in the culture. As he became more invested in the character and the
culture, the story grew and developed.

Initial attempts to move the characters and the music out of the Squeezebox environment
were largely disastrous. All the same, Mitchell and Trask had aspirations beyond the Squeezebox
performance from the start. But finding a suitable venue proved difficult. On top of the
Squeezebox shows, and in addition to Cheater’s “normal” gigs, Hedwig and the Angry Inch
(Cheater plus a costumed Mitchell) would play club dates and, on occasion, Cheater would play
with Trask taking on the role of Tommy Gnosis. But, beyond internal critical success,
community acceptance, and a growingly detailed narrative, the strange marriage of fact and
fiction, rock and theater seemed all too strange for “straight” audiences.
After years of unfocused development, established Off Broadway producer David Binder and director/producer Peter Askin became involved with the project. At the time, Binder admits that the play was more of “a series of jokes and sketches and songs” than a cohesive play with a “beginning, middle, and end.” Askin agrees that the play was initially “a mess but a wonderful mess” (Nix). By 1997, Askin aided in “streamlining and clarifying” the story by combining what he saw as the three separate entities of Hedwig: the comedy of Hedwig’s monologs, Trask’s songs, and the love story between Hedwig and Tommy Gnosis. The original production of Hedwig and the Angry Inch was produced by Binder for $29,000. Askin nostalgically remembers that he invested his salary of $700 back into the production, which was largely being run out of Binder’s apartment. The initial performances were, like the story’s original journeys outside of Squeezebox, largely failures. Binder remembers the difficulties of convincing people to come see the play and, once they were there, the difficulties in preventing them from walking out (Nix). Hedwig was a strange sell. Who was the audience and what was the ideal venue for such a production? Binder speculates that many of the same people who wax nostalgic about attending early productions are likely the very same people who walked out on performances. “People,” he remembers, “were not remotely interested in what we were doing” (Nix). After a one month run at New York City’s Westbest Artist Community, the show closed and was in search of an even more nontraditional space for their performance.

Hedwig, in Mitchell’s opinion, may have been too rock for Broadway or even Off Broadway, too straight for the gay cabaret scene, too gay for straight audiences, and too Broadway for rock audiences. Askin, Mitchell, and the other investors had to literally build a theater to house the production. They found a rundown hotel in New York City’s Meatpacking District, currently in the process of gentrification, called Hotel Riverview with a ballroom being
used for storage. The hotel had once housed survivors of the Titanic disaster (paid homage to in Bildgewater’s maritime disaster theme), but was a transient home for junkies and prostitutes. They converted the space quickly and rechristened it the Jane Street Theater. The play opened there in February of 1998. The seedy aura and goings-on of New York City’s Lower West Side added to the mystique of Hedwig. Stories include coroners removing bodies from the hotel’s rooms above the theater, transvestite prostitutes turning tricks in alleys next to lines of waiting audience members, and leaky toilets dripping mysterious liquids onto the stage and audience during performances. Mitchell remembers that in order to travel between the dressing room on the sixth floor and the stage on the first floor, the cast, in full attire, would have to walk past “German backpackers and junkies” (Nix).

The show was an enormous success. It was one of the hippest things to happen to New York City theater for a long time. Celebrities frequented performances. Reviews were resoundingly positive. New York Times theater critic Ben Brantley said Hedwig “demonstrates how contemporary musical idioms can revitalize a classic genre without sacrificing its essential sentiment. [It is a reminder that] once upon a time, people went to musicals to feel, not just to look at pretty pictures” (1998). Hedwig was accepted not only by the critical scene of its birth, but also by the mainstream theater community. The show continued as it had begun—with Mitchell starring as Hedwig, Miriam Shor as Yitzhak, and Trask as the musical director—for ten months, but after a half decade of development, composition, workshopping, performance, rehearsal, administration, and experimentation (a time period in which Hedwig completely consumed both Mitchell and Trask, as well as the dozen or so people who became swept up in the wake of its production), Mitchell found that he had to “let go of it.” They had far exceeded their goals. It was time to move on, or so he thought.
When Mitchell ceased performing as Hedwig towards the end of 1998, there were speculations that Hedwig’s run was also over. Some thought that it was time to bury Hedwig Schmidt. But Hedwig continued its run at the Jane Street Theater with various actors taking on the roles of Hedwig, Yitzhak, and the members of the Angry Inch. Several more actors took on the role of Hedwig over the next year, including first Michael Cerveris (affectionately referred to as “Hedwig No. 2” in Nix’s documentary), then Kevin Cahoon (“Hedwig No. 3”). Like Mitchell, Cerveris had appeared on Broadway and played in rock bands (most notably as a member of Bob Mould’s touring band). Kevin Cahoon too was active in New York City’s rock scene and a performer on Broadway. Other Hedwigs included Donovan Leitch, Jr. (“Hedwig No. 4”), The Breakfast Club’s Ally Sheedy (“Hedwig No. 5”), Mitchell’s understudy Asa Somers (“Hedwig No. 6”), and finally Mark McGrath (“Hedwig No. 7”), who closed Jane Street shows in the spring of 2000.

Interestingly, because he played Hedwig, presumptions of Mitchell’s sole authorship of Hedwig left Trask in an interesting situation in which he is often overshadowed. “It’s weird after years of trying to be a rock star myself,” Trask told the Village Voice in 1998, “to be in the Dave Stewart half of this very Eurhythmics relationship” referring to vocalist Annie Lennox’s public dominance over composer Stewart in media representations of the 80s band. Trask’s affinity for and experience with rock music and performing in rock venues likely influenced the production team’s tendency to blur the lines between theater and rock more by doing what Mitchell refers to as “concert shows.” The concert shows, at such places as New York’s Bowery Ballroom, were just that: concerts. The audience was attending the concert by Hedwig and the Angry Inch (or companion band, The Inch Worms), as made popular in the play Hedwig and the Angry Inch, but this was not a play. It was as if one was attending a concert by any punk-glam band fronted by a
transgender East Berliner. Guests would show up to share the stage with the band (because unlike other punk-glam transgender East Berliners, this band had some very famous friends), but it was not so different from “traditional” rock shows. Returning to the form initially workshopped at the Squeezebox performances, narratives and anecdotes (now referencing not only the growing and evolving story, but the established book being performed at the Jane Street Theater) were delivered by way of slapstick jokes as well as heartfelt banter. But, for all intents and purposes, Hedwig and the Angry Inch was, just as Mitchell and Trask first envisioned it, a “real band.”

Follow My Voice: Hedwig’s Legacy

Early on, Mitchell embraced the Internet as a tool of community and promotion. The original Hedwig.com launched in 1999, as did the fan site HedwigInABox.com. Other tribute and fan sites followed. The original webmaster of Hedwig.com remembers, “The Hedwig site was an early pioneer in the use of web as theatrical marketing tool” (Lawrence). When something big happened regarding the production, John Cameron Mitchell, even after he had already left the spotlight, made sure to let the community know. Such was the case when Ally Sheedy was announced as joining the cast following rumors that Sandra Bernhardt was a contender for the role. Possibly looking to calm nerves that the first female actress to play the role was best known for her “bratpack” past rather than the seemingly more suited and already gender-bending Bernhardt, Mitchell related the news in a message to Hedwig.com:

Just wanted to welcome Ally [Sheedy] to the Community of Hedwigs. And in that Community I included everyone who has ever been moved by the words, music and ideas of the show. That’s a lot of people. In my view, anyone who gets Hedwig is Hedwig. Hedwig is punk rock because anyone can be Hedwig. The
more Hedwigs there are running around, the happier I am. Of course, not
everyone can play Hedwig on stage. A lot of actors are scared of it. Not Ally.

(Mitchell)

In the last months of the Jane Street run, earnest work towards a cinematic version of
Hedwig was under way as Mitchell attended and shot scenes as part of the Sundance Film Lab
(where he first met Sheedy and discussed her doing the role). Mitchell was concerned with the
possibilities of handling both starring in and directing the film. New Line offered a lot of creative
freedom to the creators of Hedwig but was adamant that Mitchell star in the film. A general
consensus seems to exist among Hedwig’s inner circle that no one was better suited than
Mitchell to direct the film version. Unlike the demanding stage performance, the film would be
able to move beyond the largely singular presence of Hedwig and the Angry Inch. In the stage
version, the characters of Hedwig and Skszp (in part because the actors portraying the roles
doubled as Tommy and the musical director, respectively) were on the stage for the entire play.
The other members of the band, the only other actors on stage, were able to leave, but not the
actors playing Skszp and Hedwig. This would not have to be the case in the film version. Fearing
he would become bored with “just acting,” Mitchell felt confident to move forward with the
production as director and star (Nix).

In the stage production of Hedwig, the duality of Hedwig as also being Tommy, at least
on some existential level, was magnified by the fact that a single actor was portraying both roles.
In the film version, Michael Pitt was brought on to play Tommy. Like Mitchell, Pitt possessed a
certain level of androgyny, but unlike Mitchell, Pitt (or Trask as Pitt’s voice) is not as strong of a
singer. Whereas the duality of Tommy/Hedwig may suffer as a result of the splitting of the roles,
the issue of the less authentic Tommy (simply because he does not perform the songs as well as
Hedwig) in his performances, specifically of “Wicked Little Town” and “The Origin of Love,” is amplified. In addition, Tommy and Hedwig are able to interact on screen in a manner unattainable on the stage. The presence of two actors on the set allows the characters to kiss, fall in love, fall out of love, and argue. Specifically relevant to this is the scene in which Hedwig becomes enraged at Tommy upon discovering that in his version of “The Origin of Love,” Tommy mistakenly sings “the Siris” rather the correct “Osiris.” In regards to the notion of Zeus’s halving of people in Aristophanes’s tale, the removal of Tommy from Mitchell in the film version freed Mitchell to further explore the notion of both he and Hedwig’s relationship with Tommy. In addition to the expanded cast others, such as Hüsker Dü’s Bob Mould and rock band Girls Against Boys, were brought on to help with the production.

With the film production underway, the world of Hedwig grew. The community of fans known as the Hed-Heads, according to Kirk Lawrence, consists of “young gay men,” “old straight women,” and everything in between. Miriam Shor points out that Hedwig “became a part of their [the fans’] lives and they became a part of [the film] Hedwig, literally. They were not a part of the play” (Nix). Just as liberties with the existent characters could be taken in a manner that allowed the creators to expand storylines and narratives and add new characters, the creators included the introduction of the Hed-Heads to the story so that Hedwig became a sort of metacommentary on the pre-existent culture surrounding Hedwig. Throughout the film, Hedwig is the “internationally ignored song stylist barely standing before you” with just enough clout to book a gig at a seafood restaurant chain. Even her ability to do so is based more on the attention earned by way of the tabloid scandal rather than positive acclaim. But, in reality, Mitchell and Trask had amassed a substantial “underground” following. By no means mainstream and scarcely widely accepted (how popular can a story about a “tranny punk commie” be?), the
scattering of Hed-heads represented by their styrofoam Hedwig wig hats (a mixture of actual fans and professionally cast extras) featured in the film, who seem to grow in numbers until they dominate the previously-unaccepting audiences earlier in the film, can be viewed as a direct commentary on Mitchell and Trask’s actual creative process.

Based more on Trask’s experiences than Mitchell’s, the creators’ intention was not to just stick Hedwig in “a cool club,” as had become increasingly common in the days following Hedwig’s acceptance into the category of “New York chic.” In order to “get the kind of atmosphere of where Hedwig lives [...] the filmmakers] put her on tour [to] get the kind of sleaze and drudgery of a tour” (Nix). The original screenplay had The Angry Inch performing in a bowling alley, an airport lounge, and a highway rest stop, possibly in homage to the failing tour depicted in This is Spinal Tap (1984), but by placing Hedwig in an exclusive deal with a chain of failing restaurants, the drudgeries of touring, in which the room is just ever so slightly different and nothing seems to signal any sort of regional difference beyond the identifying screen titles, are emphasized. In fact, all the various restaurant scenes were filmed at a single location. In order to achieve a room similar but not identical to the last room, the set (an abandoned New Jersey restaurant) was more shifted and altered than redressed in order to serve as the new location. This may have been largely a financial decision, but it serves to emphasize the space as a space of rock performance only out of necessity rather than intention and design. Just as the original crew found in the Hotel Riverview a malleable space in which to create a venue, the amateur and semiprofessional musician is forced to improvise in the space made available, and Hedwig and the Angry Inch hang white bed sheets on which they project childlike animation, the film production made use of the resources available in a manner that celebrated the “amateurishness” of the situation.
Wig In A Box was released by a small Portland, Oregon-based independent record label Off Records run by producer/bassist Chris Slusarenko. The album is part orthodox tribute album (featuring artists covering the songs of Hedwig) and part more unorthodox “concept album” (featuring a new song by Trask and Mitchell placed among the songs and liberal reinterpretations of the music of Hedwig). The album—like the film’s soundtrack, but unlike the original cast recording—is arranged in a non-narrative, more rock album-like order. Artists include Sleater-Kinney, the B-52s’ Fred Schneider, They Might Be Giants, Spoon, Yoko Ono, The Polyphonic Spree, Stephen Colbert, and Cyndi Lauper. Some songs appear multiple times. The music, drastically removed from the fictional narrative, seems often to be replaced by the personae of the covering artists. They seem to take on new meaning informed by, but not entirely reliant upon, Hedwig and the Angry Inch. For example, when Yoko Ono and Yo La Tengo perform “Hedwig’s Lament,” and Ono sings the lines, “I gave a piece for my man, I gave a piece for the rock star,” the listener could easily be led to think that she is not singing about Hedwig’s relationship to Sgt. Robinson or Tommy Gnosis, but about John Lennon.

Of the album, Mitchell (who, along with Stephen Trask, was a major contributor) states that he “always liked the concept of the tribute album” and considered it a great honor to have one proposed in honor of Hedwig and the Angry Inch. The tribute album represented “something different” in respects to interpretation and liberties. Though dozens of post-John Cameron Mitchell actors had performed Hedwig, it was largely within the confines of the play. The actors, of course, each added their own “spice” to the role, but on the tribute album, not only would different voices be singing Hedwig’s words, many of them were well-known and distinct voices who, by singing the songs, applied their own interpretations of the material. Trask states that the two of them became “swept up into it” because of the album and the benefit to the Hetrick-
Martin Institute and the Harvey Milk School, a school for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth between the ages of 12 and 21” (Wig In A Box).

The Breeders perform a very subtle and simple version of “Wicked Little Town” parenthetically subtitled (as is this version on the film’s soundtrack album) “Hedwig Version,” while The Bens (a “supergroup” featuring Ben Folds, Ben Kweller, and Ben Lee) perform the “Tommy Gnosis Version,” as featured towards the end of Hedwig and the Angry Inch. In young Ben Kweller, many involved with the project believed they found an embodiment of much of the essence of the Tommy Gnosis character, as if he processed a certain earnestness and heart in his music. The Follow My Voice documentary crew finds Ben Kweller, Ben Lee, and Ben Folds at the old RCA-Victor studio in Nashville where they are preparing to record an EP for their Australian tour and the song for the tribute album. Kweller, while familiar with Hedwig, admits that he had only just seen the film the morning of the recording session. The very childlike Kweller (with the rationale of a newly recruited fanboy) proudly proclaims his love of the film and for Tommy Gnosis. The connection clearly is less personal and more musical—Ben Lee equates it to their cover of The Vapors’s “Turning Japanese.” All the same, the trio’s extensive workshopping of the song with such an academic focus (chord patterns are analyzed, melodies are theorized for harmonic quality, and obscure electronic instruments like Yamaha’s Omnichord are incorporated) creates a no less inspired and spirited rendition that harkens back to Trask and Mitchell’s own extensive academic workshopping of the material. The band of musicians’ interpretation of the song is accepted by Trask and Mitchell, despite no “authentic” relationship to the material beyond a musical appreciation and brief exposure to the basic narrative.

In contrast, sisters Kim and Kelley Deal of the Breeders identify a much more emotional connection to the film. They had been watching the film on DVD on their tour bus and began
performing a cover of “The Angry Inch.” On one occasion, John Cameron Mitchell joined The Breeders on stage to perform the song. When Kim Deal was approached to participate in the benefit, she chose to play a very minimalist and beautiful rendition of “Wicked Little Town.” It could be observed that The Bens’s song is more musically professional to a degree, but in the same vein, one may have to conclude that The Breeders’s version is far more emotional. To dismiss The Bens’s version as a more institutionalized version of the music, thereby warranting dismissal on the basis of imagined authenticity, is to dismiss the opinions of Mitchell and Trask.

Rufus Wainwright opens the album with Hedwig’s “correct” version of “The Origin of Love,” complete with the proper lyric, “And Osiris and the gods of the Nile,” while Jonathan Richman, founder of the seminal proto-punk band The Modern Lovers, provides a reprisal of the song to close the album, complete with Tommy Gnosis-like “mistaken lyrics.” If the relatively minute mistake in Tommy’s commercial version of the song (“And the Siris and the gods of the Nile,” [emphasis added]) in some way taints the “purity” of Hedwig’s “art,” thereby enraging her in the film, what would her reaction be—if in fact the lyrics were written by the fictional Hedwig rather than the actual Trask—to Richman’s cavalier treatment of her lyrics? From the first line, Richman seems to purposefully get the lyrics almost right until it seems to diverge completely from the song as written. The song’s lyrical narrative and basic structure remain partially intact and certain syllables and words sound like Trask’s original song, but it is almost as if Richman plays upon the song’s referential themes. Hedwig, a devotee of the artifice of pop music and its repetitive nature, would likely have hated it.

Jonathan Richman asked if this was “one of those projects where you got to claim your song months in advance, and they said, ‘no, in fact, we don’t care if two people or three people do the same song [...] you can even make up your own song’” (Linton). Richman made up one
and “did one” on the album. The original composition, titled “You Can’t Say When a Wall is Ready to Come Down,” a song that he claims could have been in the movie, does not appear on the finished album. But, it could be said that his cover version of “The Origin of Love” is actually a realization of such an offer within the confines of a single track. In his reinterpretation of “The Origin of Love,” Jonathan took “full advantage,” according to Slusarenko, of his offer to the artists to reinterpret the music of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Linton). Trask notes that when he first heard Richman’s version, he was disappointed upon immediately noticing Richman’s alteration of a lyric in the first line. But noticing “something very compelling about it,” Trask listened again. He notes the “Talmudic” quality in Richman’s reinterpretation of Trask’s “The Origin of Love,” which itself is a reinterpretation of various translations of Plato’s account of Aristophanes’s oration of a Greek myth. The song now ranks among his favorites on the album (Linton).

**Conclusion**

*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* continues to be performed internationally on large and small scales. The cult(ure) surrounding *Hedwig*—the collective entirety of the play, the film, the characters, the music, and the band—remains an active and productive community. The Janus Theatre Company produced *Hedwig and the Angry Inch UK* in the mid 2000s (hedwigandtheangryinch.co.uk). The Australian company of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* toured Australia in 2007 and 2008 (hedwig.com.au). Recently, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch en Francais* produced performances of a French translation of the play in Paris in late 2008 and March 2009 (Lawrence). In the tradition of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *The Sound of Music*, lines between film and live performance are blurred as local troupes produce “shadowcasts” of the film featuring performers miming (or, in some cases, actually signing) the film’s soundtrack. John
Cameron Mitchell continues to take an active role in the culture as he appears on stage with different companies’ versions of *Hedwig*. Though he no longer adorns the Hedwig wig, he seems more than happy to perform with other Hedwigs, including “shadowcasts” of the film. It is interesting that it took so long for Mitchell and Trask to get *Hedwig* accepted and now it seems that at least Mitchell is unlikely to ever be able to remove Hedwig from himself.

More than any of the three previously discussed films, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* plays with the duality of *in between*. While Hedwig is seeking to achieve a goal, and thereby pass through the liminal space between, it is one based more in recognition and acceptance than commercial success and fame (though these are perfectly acceptable byproducts of this quest) and is hegemonically hindered by too many identities of neither A nor B. She exists in the space between male and female, East and West, fabricated and authentic to such an extent that she is unable to pass beyond liminal identity in regards to professionalism-amateurism. Likewise, the play and film occupy a particular space of liminal cultural identity. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* has achieved success in worlds of theater, independent cinema, indie rock music, queer culture, and “the underground.” But, largely because of its taboo subject material and relatively culturally limited appeal, it has not achieved a firmly “insider” level of professional acceptance, nor do the creators seem interested in it doing so.

The primary goals of this project are essentially twofold: to explore the existence of amateur music, musicians, and musical narratives in popular culture predating the “rise of the amateur” in relation to the Internet and to explore four representative narratives that, despite their fictional natures, all possess a degree of influence, “authenticity,” and importance especially in regards to amateur musicians and music making. The films’ often-dismissible receptions actually, in the case of perceived authenticity, make the films more important. In a sense, the films—all commercial products with assumed goals of success (however that success is measured)—achieve a level of “authenticity” because they were not large-scale commercial successes. Instead, the “underground successes” and cult-like followings earned by the films add to the cultural value. It is important that they are all either successful enough so as to be made available to the public (even if the target audience is a small and focused subculture) or “important” or “good” enough so as to achieve a sort of “posthumous” success after the films’ initial “lives” as commercial products. Clearly, while *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* is an example of the latter, gaining commercial release over two decades after its production due in part to the push of its fans, both *Half-Cocked* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* are two very different examples of the prior. Both films achieved enough success so as to be available to a wider audience, but did not “sell out” so as to be rendered “inauthentic.” Time will tell what will become of *Ishtar*, a film that will likely never rid itself of the stigma of being one of the largest flops of modern Hollywood but may, one day, find its “rightful place.” Many of these factors are at play in regards to the often problematic, counterintuitive, and oxymoronic notions of commercial success and cultural authenticity at play with struggling amateur
musicians who straddle concepts of art and commerce. While it can be assumed that no one wants to be poor, desolate, and unknown, to claim a want for commercial success, renown, and fame is very much not “rock and roll.” While these concepts are explored diegetically within the films and are involved with “coolness” of the films as culturally important works of art versus failed commercial products, the “real world” exploration of these concepts is important to my future work within this field of study.

In this final chapter I will attempt to place my own experiences in relationship to the greater study of amateur musician narratives, briefly discuss the ubiquity of amateur musician narratives (fictional, actual, and otherwise), discuss the real world and ethnographic application of topics discussed in earlier chapters, and finally conclude with the future of the study of amateurism, amateur and semiprofessional music and music making, and the changing relationship between amateurism and professionalism in regards to popular music after the “rise of the amateur.”

**Portrait of the Young Scholar as an Amateur Musician**

I played in front of an audience for the first time during my sophomore year of high school. In a quickly formed band (formed specifically for the December talent show) I was asked to play guitar for a rendition of The Dead Kennedys’s “California Über Alles.” I could barely play the guitar, barely knew the song, and was barely confident enough to stand upon the five-foot high stage in my high school auditorium with my $90 Stratocaster knock-off. Luckily, the vocalist for the song, a friend we called “Punk Jay,” wrapped himself in plastic wrap and proceeded to wiggle and squirm uncontrollably as he belted through the lyrics. Attention was clearly not on the shy kid with the purple guitar faking his way through the barre chords. Over the years that followed, I became more adept, more confident, and more experienced at not only
standing on a stage in front of people, but also actually putting on a show and performing with a fair amount of confidence and projected bravado. For quite some time, I assumed that I would continue on a path to be a professional musician. I formed a band, recorded demos, (attempted to) talk with record execs and producers, formed more bands, played a lot, and even studied music in college.

In December of 1997, I was asked to join a band called Kind Insight. I had seen the band a few times; they were good, but I wasn’t entirely taken by them. Their songs were catchy with elements (interestingly enough) of Prince and the Grateful Dead. Damien, the band’s de facto front man, had one of those “natural” vibes when it came to playing music. He may not have known what notes he was playing on his guitar, but he seemed to figure out in what order they sounded good. Others in the band were highly trained and skilled musicians. If nothing else, they were an interesting band. I tried to catch their shows as often as shows by any band in our local Morgantown, West Virginia music scene. Aside from seeing them live a few times, we ran in similar circles and became friends. I started hanging out with the band’s keyboard player, percussionist, guitarist, and sound guy more and more. I already knew the saxophone player from school (we were both music majors at the time) and though I hadn’t really gotten to know the drummer yet (he was barely 18 years old), I liked that his name was also Colin and he seemed to have a truly sincere, newly-acquired love for cheesy 80s hair metal. Over beers and a game of pool, the members of Kind Insight told me they weren’t happy with their current bass player. I never really got to know him on a personal level and, truth be told, he may have been my least favorite element of the band, so there was little conflict when I was asked to fill in.

Of all the things I was truly impressed by with the band as I got to know them (and there were several things that impressed me about them), I was impressed that they were playing a lot
of gigs; more than a lot of the more accomplished, more well-known bands in Morgantown. In January and February of 1998 alone, they had several gigs in and around Morgantown and a couple gigs that required a fair amount of travel. I was playing out around Morgantown roughly five nights a week at the time (between scheduled gigs, regular jam sessions, and open mic nights) but Kind Insight had a lot of paying gigs. If I wanted to miss an open mic night here or there, it was no big deal, but if I signed on with Kind Insight, I was going to have a schedule.

One of the first gigs I traveled with the band was to Buckhannon, West Virginia. Some fraternity was prepared to give us far-too-much-money to play in a corner of a basement for three hours. Since we were practicing non-stop in a basement barely tall enough to allow us to stand while playing, a fraternity basement with free beer seemed a nice change. Aside from bar and club dates (the cool shows), we continued to play fraternities, restaurants, private parties, University events, and pretty much anywhere that would allow us to play.

All of the less hip and more bizarre gigs, including a recurring late-dinner gig at a restaurant on the outskirts of town that wasn’t doing too well (eerily similar to so many of Hedwig and the Angry Inch’s filmic Bildgewater’s gigs) were in preparation for a tour of Colorado ski towns. We needed money to get from West Virginia to Colorado and these were the “money gigs.” In late February the band was going to drive 28 hours to play a show in Vail, Colorado. In order to make the show “make sense,” we would stay in Colorado and play for a few more weeks. When I was initially asked to join the band, it was made clear that it was essential I was able to do these shows. I probably played in a half dozen or so different bands (ranging from making improvisational noise with friends to an official jazz ensemble at West Virginia University) at the time when Kind Insight asked me join. I saw no reason to say “no” when asked, but I wasn’t sure how to handle the three weeks away from college. I was always
interested in playing music, often at the expense of my schoolwork, but I was enrolled as a fulltime student in WVU’s Music Department. I rarely turned down a gig, but joining Kind Insight required a commitment none of my other musical endeavors required. I would not be able to do both school and the band at the same time. I missed a lot of classes as a result of late night gigs, but I would not be able to make it back for class at all while on tour. I would have to take a leave, though, at the time, I romantically called it “dropping out.”

As it turned out, I didn’t actually have to drop out of college. In reality, it probably dictated much of my academic future. Initially, I figured that some of my music professors would be happy I was gigging on such a regular basis. Surely, I thought, they wouldn’t mind it if I needed to be away for a few weeks in order to play some shows. They were professional, paying gigs and although rock music wasn’t nearly as “accepted” among the faculty as chamber music, classical, or jazz, they weren’t completely unresponsive to it either. That’s what we were hoping for as music majors, right? A career in music; to be able to make money as musicians. In fact, none were all too excited for me, with emotions and opinions ranging from “good luck, kid, have a nice life” to a complete and total lack of support. If I left to do the tour, I was told, I would have to start the entire year over since I would have fallen too behind my classmates (something that was already occurring). Another professor actually told me I had no right to leave to play such gigs without first completing my degree. Figuring my time as a music major was limited with or without the tour, I left the program. I sought refuge in the Sociology Department.

I met a professor named Ronald Althouse. Though I didn’t really know what to expect when it was suggested to me that I speak with him regarding the tour, I explained to him the situation of my less-than-promising future as a music major, my interests in popular music and
culture, and the upcoming tour with Kind Insight (that I had decided I was definitely going to do with or without academic support). As it turned out, Althouse had played in a band in his younger days, trumpet if memory serves me correctly, and was very interested in my observations on playing in an unknown band in a strange environment. I told him stories about playing in Buckhannon, WV. He talked about some sociological theory of which I was unaware. I talked about the differences in moving equipment in and out of a bar in the afternoon and at three in the morning. He mentioned names of scholars I had only peripherally heard about. Dr. Althouse asked if I would be interested in collecting my thoughts of being on tour while on tour, and present them to him upon my return. He was prepared to offer me a six-credit independent study.

Though the product of that six-credit course is long gone\(^1\), I recall it birthed specific concepts still prevalent in my work 12 years later. I am still very interested in the world and culture of amateur/semiprofessional music in the United States. I continue to attempt a “straddling” of playing music in the least academic of environments and discussing it in the most academic of environments. As I have met other “working musicians” over the years, I am always fascinated by the differences and similarities shared between largely unconnected musical genres, geographic locations, levels of perceived “success,” and eras. Interestingly, degrees of separation between two strangers are minimal in circles of amateur and semiprofessional musicians. (“Ever play Charlotte? Did you play the Visualite? No? The other place? Then you know so-and-so.”) I became more aware of the role of mediated culture on cultures I had initially

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\(^1\) In preparing this chapter, I found a 3.5” floppy disc labeled “Kind Insight Tour” in a box of obsolete media. After spending quite some time locating a disc drive capable of reading the disc, the disc was damaged and was unable to be read. I am sure a hard copy of the project exists somewhere, but I am not sure where. I had neither the foresight nor the intuition to believe it to be worthwhile for future studies.
and naively identified as an alternative to a mainstream culture. The role of mediated culture’s influence upon subsequent cultural creation became highly interesting to me. What I would later come to understand in my first class as a graduate student, Philip Alperson’s “Aesthetics of Popular Music” course at Temple University, as a mediated version of “folk tradition,” as mapped out in Theodor Gracyk’s *I Wanna Be Me*, I, at the time, found simply interesting and observable. (“We watch *Spinal Tap* and listen to Frank Zappa all the time too!”)

For Dr. Althouse, I organized my thoughts in short essays from a journal kept during the two-month tour. It was a pretty spectacular eight weeks (the initial three week tour ballooned to eight weeks once we were on the road). *Everything* was new to us. We had never dealt with really receptive or unreceptive audiences before. We had never played at a venue two nights in a row. We had never been asked to play a venue *again*. We had never had to deal with druggie promoters, arrogant headliners, or pushy opening acts. We had never been welcomed to so many parties at strangers’ homes that began at two in the morning. We had never dealt with getting stiffed on payments, getting double booked, or getting “bumped” from a bill.

It was one of the most difficult and one of the greatest times in my life. At times, while sleeping uncomfortably in the back of the seatless portion of the “Magical Pig” (our Ford Econoline we named in honor of a line from Zappa’s *Joe’s Garage*), I may have thought I was the most miserable I had ever been, but now, I view it very favorably, like a dream. Even removed by a few months, when I actually earnestly typed up the essay collection to hand in to Professor Althouse (late, I’m sure), I was already favorably looking back on it. Although I reenrolled at WVU for the following fall and stopped playing with Kind Insight soon after, I was already looking to do another tour. And, upon my return to college, I sought to continue to
explore aspects of culture that I first began to explore while in the “Magical Pig” in Colorado in 1998.

At one show, after loading in and setting up our equipment, I sat down at the bar to have a beer. We’d been in the van together driving all day, so everyone sort of scattered following the sound check—this proves to be a wonderful method of dealing with each other when tempers run high. We all retreated to our own spaces until the show was scheduled to begin. I ended up at the bar. It was late enough that there was already someone drunk at the bar and early enough that the opening bartender was still setting up for the night. I ordered a beer and said hello to the drunken guy next to me. “Put it on my tab,” the drunken guy said to the bartender. I thanked him, to which he said there was no need. “I know what you guys make. Don’t make shit. You need a beer.” I guess I did need a beer. And although it seemed he didn’t need another beer, he ordered one for himself and proceeded to take a pen out of his pocket and grabbed for a small stack of cocktail napkins.

He asked me where I was from and said no band on the road from West Virginia, playing this place, had any money. I thought we were doing okay. We had a decent guarantee (a set minimum amount that the bar owner had promised to pay us even if no one showed up to pay the cover charge at the door), had been selling at least a few pieces of merchandise every night, and almost always had a place to stay. I was happy; the band was doing pretty well. We ate regularly, all my equipment was working well, and when I needed new guitar strings I got new strings. I surely wasn’t losing money.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he muttered, “how much?” Not wanting to divulge what I saw as “personal information,” I skirted the issue, muttering, “Enough, don’t worry, enough. We’re doing fine. We’re making enough to keep going.” His inebriation was only matched by his
persistence and accuracy as he came up with some uncomfortably close raw figures and made short work of a rather overly involved mathematical equation. He deduced that I was making somewhere in the neighborhood of $1.40 an hour.

I argued for a while that it wasn’t about the money, we were getting to travel all over the United States and play our music. That wasn’t a bad life at all. But he kept chuckling, “$1.40 an hour.” Over and over, he’d mutter “$1.40 an hour” and chuckle. Even after we began playing, it was as if I could make out his lips from the stage whispering “$1.40 an hour” to himself. Clouded memories have him stumbling towards me to say goodbye by way of shaking my hand and loudly announcing to the room “$1.40 an hour” without further explanation; this was something between him and me. *We* knew that no matter what I was projecting from the stage, with the huge ego boost of amplification and semi-choreographed lighting, I was making far less than minimum wage. I was not *really* a professional musician. I wasn’t really even semiprofessional. I was an amateur and it seemed this drunken man at the bar took great pleasure in informing me of this. Today, I have come to embrace notions of amateurism in artistic, aesthetic, cultural, and professional senses of the word. At the time I did not. I remember that guy more than I remember a lot of gigs from that time. At the time I *needed* to believe I was more than *just* an amateur musician, because I had very little else. I was barely a college student. I did not have another career. I was still trying to “make it.” Much in the same way that the “failures” of big budget productions like *Ishtar* and *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* are more about the goals of the films than the actual successes of the films (because, at the time, I aspired to be a financially-stable professional musician), my failure to make even a living wage was used to defame my efforts.
The Ubiquity of the Amateur Musician Narrative

When I began this project, I envisioned focusing on representations of amateur musicians (and amateurism, in general) across several media. I had identified that I was interested in analyzing amateur and semiprofessional musician narratives, but I had not yet decided to focus specifically on narratives in film or that I would be looking only at fictional narratives. Beyond the reasons spelled out in the introductory chapter involving nostalgic clouding, etc., focusing specifically on the four fictional narratives included herein (as well as their productions and lasting cultural existences) solved two primary concerns in launching a project such as this. First, focusing on films greatly decreased the pool of media for analysis. What I had originally seen as a rather specific and rare narrative, I soon discovered was an extremely common plot device in film, television, literature, and song. The amount of media I could cover was both extensive and daunting. Knowing that there was little possibility of covering all of it, I decided on analyzing a small sampling of films (a representative foursome) that I saw as being both interesting enough for extensive analysis and under-explored enough so as to warrant the analysis. Second, so as to not overshadow the fascinating worlds of actual amateur and semiprofessional musicians—including their mediation, their real interactions with the mainstream music industry, their day jobs, etc.—by including it as a secondary or tertiary focus of a dissertation otherwise focused on fictional characters in film and television, I decided to remove the ethnographic portion of the project. These two removed portions represent ways in which I would like to expand this project in the future. Honestly, there are hundreds of potential subjects related to amateur musician narratives worthy of study.

As mentioned, the amateur musician narrative is far more common than I initially imagined. I have amassed a list of dozens of films just from the 1970s through the current time in
which amateur musician narratives play an important role. Beyond the previously discussed films, some of those films include biopics such as *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1981) on the life of country music star Loretta Lynn, *La Bamba* (1987) on Latino rocker Ritchie Valens, *Ray* (2004) on Ray Charles, and *Walk the Line* (2005) on the lives of Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash. The biopic represents both the most commercially successful use of the amateur musician narrative and the most famous in regards to their subject matter and their popularity. These films are different from the four films chosen in several respects. The use of the amateur musician narratives in biopics usually does little to challenge notions of hegemony in regards to professional domination built upon commercial success. Rare is the biopic that deals with unknown or even little known celebrities, though some do exist, such as 2007’s *What We Do Is Secret* on Germs front man Darby Crash who committed suicide the day before the John Lennon assassination. Also rare is the biopic that deals only with a celebrity’s pre-success. Largely focused on the *rise* to prominence, most of these films do not spent much time on a musician’s amateur or early years beyond the beginning of the film’s first act.

Other fictional comedies make use of the amateur musician narrative such as *The Blues Brothers* (1980) in which Jake and Elwood Blues, believing themselves to be on a mission from God, “get the band back together” to save their former orphanage; *Howard the Duck* (1986) in which a duck from outer space becomes the manager of Lea Thompson’s character’s struggling band, Cherry Bomb; *One Crazy Summer* (1986) in which Demi Moore’s character is trying to earn enough money playing Nantucket dive bars to save her grandfather’s house; *CB4* (1993), a mockumentary following the incredibly inauthentic members of a successful gangsta rap band called Cell Block 4; and *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2008), a brilliant parody of biopics and rags to riches stories in general. These films represent a cross-section of films worthy of this
study but, for one reason or another, were not chosen. While I do believe that each of these films depicts interesting and specific elements of amateur musician narratives from their respective eras, only The Blues Brothers and Walk Hard do much to explore the amateur musician narrative beyond a fairly inconsequential plot device.

Within television, the fictional amateur musician narrative is also rather common. Initially, I identified four different categories as a way to classify and account for the various occurrences of amateur musicians just in situation comedies, though the narrative is also present in variety shows, documentaries, and news magazines. The categories included programs in which a regular cast member joins an amateur or semiprofessional band for a single episode, a short period of time, or in a sporadically recurring manner (including The Andy Griffith Show, The Brady Bunch, Mr. Belvedere, Dawson’s Creek [admittedly not a half hour sitcom, but relevant herein], ALF, and Saved By the Bell just to name a few); programs in which famous musician guest stars portray members of an amateur or semiprofessional band (including The Drew Carey Show in which the Drew-has-a-band episodes feature guest starring musicians such as Joe Walsh, members of ZZ Top, and “Weird Al” Yankovic); sitcoms in which regular cast members also have an amateur or semiprofessional band that makes (ir)regular appearances throughout the series (including both the UK and US versions of The Office, Gilmore Girls, Happy Days, Degrassi Junior High, and Degrassi: The New Generation); and in the final category I placed shows in which an amateur or semiprofessional band is major part of the entire series. This final category includes, unsurprisingly, a list of obscure, short-run show like early-1990s Saturday morning Saved By the Bell spin-off California Dreams and Getting Together, a Partridge Family spin-off starring Bobby Sherman as an aspiring songwriter struggling to make it
with his tone-deaf lyricist². In these sitcoms, the struggles of everyday life are played out upon a backdrop of life as an amateur musician. As with other interchangeable backdrops of sitcoms, the narratives are more akin to making two dates for the same evening, the boss coming over with little time to prepare, and a wacky thing happening on the way to pay rent. The most famous of these sitcoms is likely *The Monkees*. These are only a handful of examples.

In the pages of comedian and author T. Mike Childs’s *The Rocklopedia Fakebandica* numerous amateur musician narratives can be found. Interestingly relevant to this project is the fact that all the bands and artists in Childs’s book are fictional. So, among the identified *amateur* musicians are other fictional *professional* musicians. The book is a companion to Childs’s website fakebands.com which is a growing reference of fake bands that have become “real” by way of film, television, and other media. In fact, a band seems to only need a mere mention devoid of actual performance to make the list. A recent entry is for a band called “The White Strokes” (a compounding of actual bands The White Stripes and The Strokes) who’s only *actual* presentation is by way of a novelty t-shirt.

Former editor of *Modern Screen* and hugely prolific author (he has purportedly written over 50 books on rock music, television, and film) Mark Bego’s *TV Rock* is a book concerned with both cataloging the various occurrences of “TV Rock” and creating a case for the actual existence of something called “TV Rock.” Bego, who was passed up to be one of the original MTV VJs (7), is concerned primarily with the larger arena of rock and pop music and television’s intersections. Chapters of the 1988 book include chapters on actual rock stars turned actor, concert television (particularly relevant to the early days of MTV), award shows, and music video programs. The book is, of course, laden with pages upon pages on *The Monkees*,

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² This show only lasted five episodes in 1971-1972.
The Partridge Family, Ricky Nelson, Elvis Presley, Rick Springfield, and other musician/actors who have blurred the lines between actor and musician, fictional and actual, and have, in turn, wrestled throughout their careers with concepts of authenticity, actuality, and being taken seriously. Though most are presented without in-depth analysis and dozens of other examples of any of Bego’s categories could be cited thereby potentially rendering the book incomplete, the sheer breadth of Bego’s coverage makes the book a valuable resource to the study of television and music’s intersection. Of particular interest to my research are the chapters entitled “Rock & Roll Amateur Hour” and “Cartoon TV Rock.” In the “Amateur Hour” chapter, Bego catalogs four programs he identifies as rock amateur programs. Bego notes that although the televised amateur competition show has had a place on television since its inception, only “on rare occasions” have rock musicians been important to the genre (337). Whether one agrees or disagrees with this statement is not as interesting as the observation that of the four programs discussed by Bego (Showcase ’68, It’s Happening, Star Search, and Puttin’ On The Hits), only the lip-synching competition, Puttin’ On The Hits, was currently on the air at the time of Bego’s writing. A decade later, with the rise of programs such as American Idol and other amateur competition programs now under the genre header of “reality television,” that Bego’s predicted “time and time again revival” would come to fruition (337). Rather than American Idol ushering in a new genre of television, its place in the “rise of the amateur” is more a revival re-imagined to take advantage of technological and social advancements in communications.

“Liminality”: An Ethnographic Documentary

In Summer 2007, I began conducted interviews with working and touring musicians. It was my intention to use the data collected from these interviews in a section of the dissertation focused on actual amateur/semiprofessional musicians and the footage collected for a
documentary video I was tentatively calling *Liminality: A Music Documentary*. I utilized my “insider” connections, relationships with friends, and “cold calls” in order to collection interviews with musicians. I was excited that nearly everyone I contacted was receptive and highly interested in talking with me. By the end of the summer, I collected approximately 15 hours of interview footage, five hours of performance footage, attended the Pitchfork Music Festival with press credentials, and set up initial interactions with numerous interested musicians of various levels of professionalism. The documentary was meant to be more about the move from amateur status—the forming of a band, *becoming* professional, and what that means—rather than focusing specifically on the amateur narratives of the preceding chapters. In a matter of only a few months, I interviewed and video taped performances by Hamell on Trial (Syracuse, New York, Righteous Babe Records), Menomena (Portland, Oregon, Barsuk Records), Oxford Collapse (Brooklyn, New York, Sub Pop Records), Twilight Sad (Glasgow, Scotland, Fat Cat Records), Julie Sokolow (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Western Vinyl Records), Blake Miller (Columbus, Ohio, Exit Stencil Records), and others. While I soon discovered that conducting ethnographic research amidst an already busy schedule that included a job search, preparations for a wedding, teaching, and a research-driven dissertation was far too much to handle, I have not entirely given up on the project.

While in the analysis of fictional amateur narratives the particular instances chosen for the screen can be analyzed in the respects to their projected images and messages, the *real* narratives of *real* amateur musicians are not as “clean.” For example, there are not always clear and precise lines of division regarding roles, relationships, and intended messages. For example, while the lives of the three girls who would go on to become The Stains in *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* do not exist beyond the closing credits of the film (aside from
the “life” of the film itself), the lives of actual amateur and semiprofessional musicians do. So, 
while it is easy to identify Corrine Burns, her sister, and her cousin as poor, working class people 
with no other hope for escaping their lives, we cannot really say the same about actual musicians 
without running the risk of offense, incorrect assumption and gross totalization. Simply put, 
characters are much easier to analyze than real people. In “The Act You’ve Known for All These 
Years: Telling the Tale of The Beatles,” Ian Ingles explores many of these concepts in regards to 
the biopic. Ingles states that despite the overabundance of Beatle-related media (including live 
performances, documentary film and video, and interviews) only 1979’s The Birth of the Beatles 
and 1993’s Backbeat present dramatizations of the largely pre-mediated, early years prior to the 
rise of “Beatlemania.” Ingles offers, “While their typification of the past both embodies and 
stimulates nostalgia, it has to be remembered that these pasts are not sites for histories of the 
Beatles, but for stories about the Beatles. Nostalgia is not a tool with which we can really 
discover the past, but a perspective from which we comfortably view the past” (89). The working 
class backgrounds so rich to the stories contained within Birth of the Beatles and Backbeat 
“sketch out the prologue to a romantic, even heroic, odyssey in which [the members of The 
Beatles] struggle against heartbreak and tragedy to become the world’s most successful 
performers,” but, to the actual members of the band, the working class life was one they were 
glad to escape and is viewed far less romantically (88). While the narratives contained within the 
films may seem in opposition to the opulence, success, and fame of The Beatles, to identify the 
narratives as histories of The Beatles before they became “commercial,” is to miss many of the 
understudies of the, albeit smaller scale, culture of amateur, semiprofessional, local, and subcultural 
musicians. Granted, the amateur narratives contained within Birth and Backbeat are likely only 
interesting because of who those characters really are or who they would go on to become, but
even in the analyses of lesser known musicians, what is good for a narrative story is not always good for a proper study.

British communications scholar Jason Toynbee introduced a term that is quite useful when exploring the real lives of real “working musicians” unnecessary to the study of fictionalized accounts in which scenes are dissected and analyzed like short, representational vignettes. While within the narratives of the films, the relationship of the worlds of The Stains, Rogers & Clarke, Truckstop, and Hedwig and the Angry Inch are explored in their relationship to the greater media industry in the sense that because they are all films operating, to some extent, within a larger commercial structure, the real lives of real semiprofessional musicians do not have the luxury of an inherent relationship with a likely-unconcerned professional industry. Toynbee’s “proto-market” is useful in the sense that it removes the common mistake of assigning romantic concepts of a non-commercial or anti-commercial stigma to music and media that exists “under the radar” or in an “underground scene.”

What distinguished proto-markets is that they bring together performer and audience in arenas which are not fully commodified. Examples include local rock scenes, dance music networks, or jazz performances by players taking time out from regular session work. Commodity exchange does go on in cases like these. Records are bought and sold, audiences pay to enter clubs and pub back rooms. But the defining characteristic of the proto-market is that the level of activity cannot be explained by economic factors alone. People are engaged in music-making sometimes for the love of it, sometimes for the esteem and sometimes because they expect in the future to enter the music industry proper. (27)
In speaking with many of the musicians on camera, the subjects of “negotiating real life” and making ends meet on and off the road dominated any real or imagined relationship with a large media industry. Even though I spoke with many musicians during large festivals featuring veteran musical acts who presumably do not need to worry about things like day jobs while not touring, the musicians I spoke to were largely consumed by such subjects. Brent Knopf of Portland, Oregon’s Menomena spoke about having a “very understanding boss” who would let him return to his job while not on the road. The members of Brooklyn’s Oxford Collapse held down a variety of jobs while not on the road ranging from audio engineering to carpentry. While both bands were under contract with well-known independent record labels at the times of our discussions, neither seemed to hint at a need to progress towards a more professional, more “industry” record label. And while neither band hid a desire to support themselves solely by playing music, neither seemed willing to change their music or approach in order to do so. Each band possessed (and continues to possess) a strong following, supportive record company, and relatively successful career. The fact that they must also work day jobs in order to do so was less a problem that needed corrected than a reality of their lives they gladly accepted. If nothing else, it humbled them and seemed to make them appreciate their success.

Toynbee believes that the notion of success equaling “selling out” when viewed from within the subcultural space of a musician’s “humble beginnings” is an important concept. There are several factors at play. “The imperative in such a field is for artists and audiences to distinguish themselves from the values associated with the mass market” (27). To not do so is to run the risk of being a lesser-than version of the mainstream rather than a purposefully different and separate “alternative.” More or less: a minor league to the popular from which tomorrow’s pop stars can work out the bugs in preparation for large-scale success. Pragmatically, Toynbee
offers a potentially contradictory concept regarding a need to differentiate oneself from the mainstream: probable failure. This “strategy of distinction” may be grounded in the fact that “the repudiation of success constitutes an insurance policy, a sober recognition of the likelihood of failure. The many musicians who are not selected [to join the ranks of the commercially successful elite] can always explain their lack of success as a consequence of having stuck to non-commercial principals” (27).

Similarly, though most musicians I spoke to had strong feelings of distrust and even disdain for the mainstream commercial music industry, none were completely removed from a relationship to it (either by way of performing at corporately sponsored festivals or signing to a commercial record label). Only Ed Hamell, the sole member of Hamell on Trial, spoke of an active “strategy of distinction.” Interesting, he was also one of the more successful, most professional (he does not, I believe, currently have a “day job”), and older musicians I spoke with about the subjects of amateur-professional musician relationships. The “gray area” between amateur and professional, according to Ed Hamell, may be “self-induced.” Hammell continued:

Some people, when choosing a career path, look to be as successful as they can possibly be and this means embracing the mainstream... and doing what you need to do to be as big as you can possibly be. To be embraced by as many people as possible. Others might choose the [...] road less taken and stir things up a little bit. In addition to entertaining the audience, they might challenge the audience. [...] My audience, more often than not, is me. I think what would I want to see were I to walk into a venue. “What’s this guy gonna give me? Is it gonna be truthful? Is it gonna be confessional?” Yes, I want it to be entertaining; I don’t want anyone on a soapbox or whatever. Funny is good. But also, let’s push it a little bit. Let’s
get edgy. And consequently, by doing that, you limit yourself. You know you’re never gonna be Madonna. You’re never even gonna be Dwight Yoakum. You know you’re gonna work the edges.

Hamell romantically believes that all the effort of “working the edges” may never be realized in an artist’s own lifetime and may only be realized posthumously. In fact Hamell is preoccupied with such subjects as evident in his ode to deceased stand-up comedian Bill Hicks entitled “Bill Hicks (Ascension)” in which the singer pines over the loss only to realize that “this is the real world and Bill had cancer” before returning to a fanciful imagining of a sold-out two-week run of Hicks performances in Heaven. Our loss, Hamell presents, is their gain. In the future, we will all come to understand.

Hamell speculated that anyone in “that gray area” is there not necessarily because “that’s the way it is” or because they “aren’t good enough,” but possibly because “some choose that path and are very much happy in it.” Hamell’s last “day job” was at a pizza shop in Austin, Texas. As is the case with much of Hamell’s material, the events and situations of this job found their way into a song (unsuitable for “PG-13 events”). He remembers that he was delivering pizzas but he was also signing autographs because, at the time, he was signed to a major record label. Though his relationship with the mainstream record industry was short lived (he would only release one more record on a major label before “retreating” back to the underground), interestingly it was the time when he was more a part of the corporate machine that it was necessary to work a day job. Currently Hamell is signed to Ani Difranco’s Righteous Babe Records, one of the most successful and purposefully “edgy” independent record labels in the United States. Difranco is, according to Hamell, a wonderful boss, confidante, friend, and
producer; something few mainstream artists would likely not be able to say about their record label’s owner.

While Hamell is assertively on the edge as a personal choice, he should not be viewed as a “representative representation” of most musical acts. For one, he is extremely talented and has earned a loyal and supportive following. While I would venture that most pursuing the performance of popular music with any level of seriousness believe themselves to be in possession of some talent, Ed Hamell is, quite simply, the “real deal.” He is a highly skilled guitarist with a particular style of percussive playing and a truthful and intelligent lyricist whose songs are built upon personal stories of struggle, drug abuse, and experience. But, most important to the peculiarities of Ed Hamell’s career, as opposed to other bands, is the fact that he is the sole member of Hamell on Trial. Hamell on Trial is a one-man band in the truest sense of the phrase. His touring entourage can be just him and, at most, includes only one or two other assistants on the road. This decision, though potentially artistically driven, is at its core extremely economically sound.

The Future of the Amateur-Semiprofessional Musician

Website MyFirstBand.com is dedicated to “Amateur Garage Bands From The 60’s.” Many of the bands—some of which include Anaconda (from St. Louis, MO), The Ancestors (from Dublin, GA), The Angry (from Canton, OH), Animal Crackers (from Birmingham, MI), and Apartment 5-D (from Fort Worth, TX)—are otherwise virtually unknown. For example, Apartment 5-D’s clearly autobiographical statement simply explains:

The 3 guitar players grew up down the street from each other - in the seventh grade, one got a guitar, then another - then I got a bass and we started playing -
picked up a drummer - changed drummers, picked up a lead singer - and never looked back. (http://www.myfirstband.com/FirstBandApartment5D.html)

The band, like most bands on the site, existed between the mid-to-late 1960s to the very early 1970s. It featured a few hometown friends who went to school together, traveled to a few shows, and had some fun. Maybe some in the band possessed some aspirations or dreams for lasting careers in music, but ultimately, life got in the way and the band fizzled out. But, that is the goal of MyFirstBand.com, the preservation of stories just like this, otherwise lost to memory and time.

“Did you have a garage band back in the 60's between 1964 and 1970? With the advent of the British invasion, it seemed like there was a rock and roll band on every block in those days. [...] Musicians Keith Buckley and Dan Angott are looking for those kids, all grown up now and possibly enduring their own kid's (or grand kid's) band practice sessions in the garage or basement, to contribute to their web site” (http://www.myfirstband.com/MFBIndex.html). Some of the bands, like Apartment 5-D, are relatively less accomplished even in the world of amateur music of the 1960s, but others, like Memphis, TN’s The Guilloteens (not to be confused with the fictional band discussed in Chapter Three) or the Bronx’s Grass Menagerie (featuring a pre-fame actor Chazz Palminteri) signed with management, had endorsement deals, made press material, played a fair amount of professional shows, and recorded commercially available music. Some of that music has found its way onto collections of such music such as the Nuggets series (Rhino) or more regionally oriented collections on Get Hip or Sundazed Records, but most of the narrative is preserved only through personal recollection on MyFirstBand.com.

The Internet has created an interesting media passage between the amateur and semiprofessional musician and a potential audience nonexistent in earlier mediation. Surely,
financial, educational, and cultural hindrances exist in allowing “A” (the producer) to reach “B” (the consumer), but no longer does external approval or disapproval decide whether a song (or any cultural product able to be digitally delivered) is “good enough” to warrant the financial investment necessary to transport the music to the listener by way of a recorded, duplicated, and distributed medium. A culture of the amateur producer has arisen, or, rather, we as potential consumers are able to gain access to it. It has always been there, but the problem was primarily in getting to “there.” Whereas professional culture relies on a lack of transparency of the methods of production and is highly unlikely to allow media access into the technical process of production methods and “trade secrets” so as to allow a “warts and all” view of the controlled image of the musician, amateur culture either by design or desire does not have the luxury of such control over image and access. Furthermore, whereas professional consumption is largely external and removed (in other words, consumed by those other than peers and by those consumers whose consumption is spatially and temporally removed from the producer), amateur and semiprofessional consumption is largely by those only marginally removed socially and culturally from the producer. I am far more likely to purchase a CD directly from a traveling band on an independent record label at a club than directly from Prince. On the Internet, the consumer is more likely to able to gain access to the amateur producer with minimal intermediaries (digital or human) than a professional musician.

Fame—or commercial success, notoriety, cultural relevance, etc.—is a near prerequisite for the act of somewhat public nostalgic fondness for a time when one was less successful, less famous, or less professional. One must, it seems, achieve “something,” in order to reflect on one’s time with “nothing” with any sort of nostalgic longing. Even personal nostalgic reflection necessitates a financial, temporal, spatial, or social removal from the time one is nostalgic for.
But for there to be a commercial reflection and nostalgic retelling of one’s past, the subject’s present is likely to already be commercially viable and available. For example, for the collection of an artist’s intimate and raw demo recordings to be made commercially available despite the lack of intention to do so at the time of the recording’s creation (as is the case with early recordings of established artists, which would otherwise be or were previously dismissed as too amateurish for commercial release, made available in the wake of an artist’s or band’s commercial success, or the act of re-releasing rare or small-run albums after a band achieves success). Often included with such a release is a nostalgic reflection upon a “simpler,” more “real,” time. Surely, if one can believe that absolute power corrupts absolutely, even the marginal power of a midlevel celebrity could potentially corrupt partially. Specifically, it is possible that nostalgic recollections of a now-idealized past may always be corrupted.
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