PRESSED BETWEEN THE PAGES OF MY MIND: TANGIBILITY, PERFORMANCE, AND TECHNOLOGY IN ARCHIVAL POPULAR MUSIC RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

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Acknowledging the unique ontological nature of sound recording, this project seeks to outline a framework for working with archival sources in popular music scholarship. The proposed theoretical lens combines influences from cultural studies, historical audience studies, and performance studies in order to encourage a broader appreciation of the popular music archive and the identity-making cultural practices surrounding the popular music archive. Such an endeavor requires the acknowledgement of three theoretical considerations: technology, performance, and tangibility.

To illustrate the breadth of readings that this approach to the popular music archive can yield, each chapter uses source material from the Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives at Bowling Green State University. Chapter Two analyzes the contents of rock promotional materials and argues that these technologies of representation code rock music according to semiotic markers of masculinity, whiteness, and mythic America. Chapter Three argues that themes of inclusion and exclusion in punk fanzines work to unite individual, localized scenes into a translocal scene that transcends time and geographical boundaries through shared narratives and common values. Chapter Four examines the construction of audience identity through teen-oriented artist biographies and argues that such technologies of representation police (female) fan behavior through narratives of “proper” fandom. Chapter Five explores themes of physical separation and reunion through the American Top 40 Long Distance Dedication segment and argues that the
format’s affective qualities are inextricably bound to physical embodiment and common physical vulnerability.

The project concludes with a revisiting of the concepts of tangibility, performance, and technology in the age of the digital archive through brief case studies of the iPod, the play count, and the ubiquity of Auto-Tune in contemporary popular music. Ultimately, the project makes a case for an active music archive: taking technology, tangibility, and performance into consideration allows for archival scholarship in popular music to be as lively as the music itself.
For my dedication, I would like to take a cue from Céline Dion, who, during her *A New Day* stage show in Las Vegas, dedicated the song “If I Could” to “all the parents and children of the world.” As fourfour blogger Rich Juzwiak pointed out, THAT’S EFFING EVERYBODY.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“[P]opular music is more than just a sound,” wrote music scholar Mary Harron in a 1988 essay. “It is also a picture on a wall, an album cover, an interview, a fashion, a stadium concert shared with thousands, an adolescent’s lonely fantasy.”¹ Commercial media artifacts—sound recordings, magazines and books, concert t-shirts, interview videos—are the chattel onto which musical meaning is projected and through which musical identity is articulated. The acquisition and collection of these artifacts is a logical impulse for many music fans, and much has been written on the intense relationships that develop between fans and their collections and among communities of collectors.²

Just as the physical collection of music artifacts is the lifeblood of any music fan, so too are the acts of archival collection and research crucial to the goals of the popular music scholar. This project is concerned with outlining an approach to archival popular music research that takes into account the unique properties of recorded music artifacts: incorporating performance theory, semiotic analysis, and rigorous historical methodology, the present study will explore this proposed analytic lens through four case studies employing source material from Bowling Green State University’s Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives.

As I will argue, the historical archive is not simply a repository for the dead and dusty remnants of once-live and contemporary music fandom. Rather, it is an active locus of artist and audience identity formation. When the popular music researcher listens through the traces of the archive, a surprising vitality is revealed in the materials. Through the four case studies that comprise this project, I will contextualize the practice of archival music research within three theoretical considerations: tangibility, performance, and technology.
This chapter begins with a discussion of the themes of tangibility and collection in writings about popular music fandom. Traditionally, music fans have regarded sound recordings as ontologically unique. The act of listening to recorded music often involves the formation of fierce loyalties to a certain medium (LP enthusiasts, for example), the development of both personal and communal audile practices (the rituals of iPod ownership and listening, for example), and the physical collection of sound recordings and other artifacts. Recorded music thus represents a unique kind of embodiment—one that can be discussed productively in the context of performance. The notion of performance provides a broad, flexible framework that can incorporate all the facets of consuming sound recordings: the performances captured on recordings, the physical performances by recordings, and all the performances involved in collecting, preserving, and listening to recordings.

This chapter’s third and final theoretical concern is with outlining a broad understanding of technology for archival music research. While sound recording histories have traditionally centered on a particular technology (and often have employed technological determinist perspectives that assume that technological change is the sole catalyst for changes in recording and listening practices), a more fruitful way for the archivist and archival researcher to understand technology is as a particular embodiment of performances—the characteristics of which shape the contours of musical practices. The case studies in this project will all involve analyses of the tangible performances I am referring to as technologies of representation. Ultimately, I argue that reconsidering the preserved materials of the archive as performance technologies with fragile, disposable, or otherwise rare corporeality is fundamental to the dual enterprises of popular music collection and scholarship.
Music Is a Thing: the Archive, Tangibility and the Ontology of Recorded Sound

In 1947, sociologist David Riesman interviewed a group of teenagers in Chicago and offered this interpretation of their collection of records:

Like the ‘trading cards’ which symbolize competitive consumption for the eight-to eleven-year olds, the collection of records seemed to be one way of establishing one’s relatedness to the group…. Tunes meant people: roads to people, remembrances of them. At the same time the teen-agers showed great anxiety about having the “right” preferences…. the cultural objects, whatever their nature, are mementos that somehow remain unhumanized by the force of a genuinely fetishistic attachment.5

Riesman’s criticism, though offered in a culturally and historically specific context, nonetheless speaks to the centrality of collecting to music fandom. Like Riesman’s critique suggests, many discourses surrounding collecting are hardly flattering to participants, yet they all point to collection as a vital activity for music fans. Record collecting has been described (along with other “extreme” kinds of fandom) as a type of pathology.6 It has been characterized as a masculinist obsession with mastery over cultural knowledge;7 it has been scrutinized as one of the discriminatory practices that separate “real fans” from “groupies.”8 Regardless of the shape this practice takes among the many modes of consumption in music fandom, collecting physical objects (including recordings, books, posters, t-shirts, et cetera) is just as much a part of consuming music as is listening to music or attending live performances.9

While collecting in some form is central to the act of music fandom, the act of collection cannot explain all the pleasures of music consumption. Certainly, music fandom is about ownership. However, it is also deeply dependent on tangibility—the touching and handling of beloved albums, media devices, or other physical objects. Those who identify as music collectors
in particular see tangibility as one of the most pleasurable aspects of listening to recorded music. In his book *Vinyl Junkies*, Brett Milano interviews record collectors—many of whom cite some aspect of tangibility as one of the reasons they collect music. Former Cramps drummer Miriam Linna claims that “‘a record is that object that you can hold and watch and learn from’” and muses that the touch of the people who created a record and believed in a record becomes embedded in its grooves. Milano writes that collectors appreciate a record as an object and “make discoveries from the record itself… Placing the needle in the groove is a physical act—maybe a sexual one, if you really want to stretch the metaphor.”

Not only is tangibility essential to the collecting practices of music fans, it is also essential to the very act of listening to recorded music. For many cultural studies scholars, recording technology could never—and should never—be considered a transparent documentation of a live musical event. To the contrary, many scholars contend that sound recordings have no pretense of transparency. In *Rhythm and Noise: an Aesthetics of Rock*, Theodore Gracyk writes that sound recordings are the means through which fans come to know musical artists and points out that recordings remain viable entities long after musical groups have ceased to exist. Recordings thus “represent performances rather than transmit them.”

Gracyk’s assertion that sound recordings do not function merely as media of transmission suggests a need to theorize the ontological distinctiveness of recorded music. As Evan Eisenberg puts it in his 1987 book *The Recording Angel*, “[i]n 1877 music began to become a thing” and as such, it could be collected as any cultural object. The precise historical moment of that transformation is not definite, although there seems to be agreement among popular music scholars that the emergence of the sound recording as the primary medium of music consumption was a mid-twentieth-century phenomenon. Tim J. Anderson, for example,
outlines a number of shifting cultural practices in the United States just after World War II that led to sound recordings’ gaining aesthetic and industrial significance.\textsuperscript{15} Reebee Garofalo writes that 1950s rock and roll was significant in that it was the first genre whose primary text was the sound recording.\textsuperscript{16}

In other words, for many historians of sound recordings, the recording process changed the production and reception of music, but that change was not a change for the worse. In fact, many scholars have pointed to the benefits to the distinct method of documentation presented by sound recording. Michael Chanan writes that the invention of sound recording led to a democratization of the musical canon; forms of music like jazz and blues that often eluded traditional musical notation could exist as and could be communicated as recordings.\textsuperscript{17} The historical importance of tangibility to music consumption goes hand in hand with the mindful handling of archival materials in popular music scholarship. The music archive deals in tangibles—the very artifacts around which music consumption revolves.

The importance of tangibility to recorded music and its secondary texts also reveals itself when scholars and archivists are faced with issues of impermanence in the preservation of source materials. When sound recording was a new phenomenon, the idea that recordings could preserve voices and performances permanently was little more than wishful thinking. Still, the phonograph’s curmudgeonly inventor, Thomas Edison, had grand designs for the machine from the beginning. In an 1878 piece in the \textit{North American Review}, Edison listed a range of business and personal uses for the machine, including the preservation of “the sayings, the voices, and \textit{the last words} of the dying member of the family.”\textsuperscript{18} That relatively few pre-1900 cylinders remain in existence tells us all we need to know about the practicality of \textit{that} goal. The first recordings
generally could not be played more than once or twice before being ruined, and early commercial wax cylinders fared little better.  

Still, the values of archival collection—the desire for permanence in and preservation of sound recordings—were part of the program of recorded music from the beginning even despite their impossibility. Jonathan Sterne writes that the early technological rhetoric of sound recording—that recordings could preserve otherwise ephemeral sounds for the ages—was a reflection of Victorian-era obsessions with death and preservation, not a reflection of the medium’s actual abilities. The cracks, scratches, hisses, and pops associated with the decay and wear of sound recordings remind us that the fragile physicality of recorded music is part of its aura.

I do use the word “aura” as a deliberate nod to Walter Benjamin… although the applicability of Benjamin’s work to sound recordings does warrant further discussion. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin sees the widespread reproduction of art objects as a potentially liberating force in culture. The aura of a work of art is tied largely to the ritual function of art. Historically, the cult value of ritual objects decreases as more people view the ritual object. Once ritual objects become detached from their ceremonial purposes via exhibition, they enter the realm of Art. With the advent of mechanical reproduction of art, art’s dependence on ritual weakens even further. So, too, does the connection between art and “outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery.” To Benjamin, the end of these traditional concepts would make it increasingly difficult for the powerful to hold populations in their ideological sway.

It is clear that Benjamin’s prophecy about the emancipatory potential of mechanically reproduced art has never come to fruition in the context of mechanically reproduced music.
Though Eisenberg never states this outright in *The Recording Angel*, he does intimate that perhaps Benjamin’s distinction between traditional art and that which has been mechanically reproduced does not necessarily apply to a sound recording, which does not typically seek to copy a ritualized musical event. 23 In spite of the uncertainty of Benjamin’s applicability to popular music, popular music scholars tend to speak of aura as something that is definitely part of music consumption—whether the aura in question is located in the record itself, in the musical artist, or between the live performance and recording.24 The general consensus seems to be that not only has the aura not withered with the mechanical reproduction of music, it is still intact and is inextricably bound to sound recordings. As club cultures scholar Sarah Thornton explains, “records accrued their own authenticities. Recording technologies did not, therefore, corrode or demystify ‘aura’ as much as disperse and re-locate it.”25

If the embodiment of music within a recording carries with it an aura or distinct personality, then that aura is the result of the interacting sets of cultural practices that created the recording. The sound recording also creates a distinct set of consumption rituals. Listening to a recording involves mindful recognition of tangibility—placing a needle in the groove of an LP, plucking a CD from its case with one’s thumb and forefinger, gently spinning an mp3 player’s scroll wheel. Acknowledging the importance of tangibility to the practices surrounding popular music is a goal of this project. Whether tangibility occurs in the form of the physical collection of otherwise dismissible artist promotional materials (as I will discuss in Chapter Two) or in the form of the almost sensual relationship between a music fan and her or his iPod (as I will discuss in Chapter Six), tangibility is vital to both this project’s conceptualization of the popular music archive and to music consumption rituals in general.
Confronting imperfections and wear is another part of acknowledging tangibility within these consumption rituals. Every music fan has had an experience with the tape that melted on the car dashboard, the scratched CD that always skips at a certain part of a certain song, the once-pristine white ear buds that become grubby and gray with use. In spite of the historical precedent of hailing the sound recording as an enduring documentation of a performance, the fact that recording media warp and deteriorate suggests that they are far from permanent. Jonathan Sterne writes that a record’s “state of disrepair suggests that the tendency of the medium is, far from permanence, toward simply a different temporalization, a different historicity. The material form of recorded sound—the record itself—is still another form of ephemerality.”

At this point, it would be prudent to acknowledge yet another form of ephemerality in regards to sound recording: the ephemerality of music media formats. It is no secret that as the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, we are living in a time when digital transmission of sound recordings is quickly becoming standard over the physical compact disc. Or, in the words of Slate columnist Daniel Gross, recently “music journalists have written about 80 requiems for the compact disc, mostly in the key of boo-hoo major.” Though Gross argues that small upstart companies doing strategic CD sales are and will continue to be economically viable, the music industry model relying primarily CD sales (and only supplemented by digital music downloads) is rapidly changing. Traditional music retailers are closing or shrinking: over 2700 music stores have closed since 2003, and retailers such as Wal-Mart are now devoting significantly less square footage to CDs than in the past. It is clear that many music fans now prefer digital downloads of music—a mode of transmission that renders itself intangible to the
consumer (although digital music of course must be played on something tangible, such as computers, iPods, cell phones, et cetera).

The changing face of recorded music consumption, rather than making me hesitant to emphasize tangibility and collection in this project, actually encourages my focus on these concerns. Chapter Six, in particular, will address the digital music archive and the myth of its accompanying loss of materiality. It must be pointed out that digital music collection is not entirely free from the burdens of embodiment. Digital storage media often become corrupted. Servers crash, and digital information becomes lost. Certain digital information may be deemed unimportant and then deleted. Or, conversely, an overabundance of digital information and a lack of good finding tools may render certain data invisible or useless. No matter what myths may circulate about the digital transmission of music—about its limitless freedoms and capacities—it, too, ultimately relies on physical collection and organization.

Thus, all material forms of recorded music are ultimately ephemeral. The story of their use, misuse, disuse, disrepair, and storage is part of the story of archival collections and research. This ephemerality calls for a certain cognizance of the impermanence of archived print materials. Just as the physical human body degrades (ultimately dying and decomposing), the physical objects that represent music performances degrade with each playing, each handling. Tangibility is thus crucial to both archiving and music collecting. As I will discuss in the next section, acknowledging the centrality of tangibility to music consumption opens up the possibility of viewing archival materials through the lens of performance—both the physical performance of the materials, and the performances of artist and audience identity embedded in the materials.
Performance in Materials, Performance of Materials

In *Blooded Thought*, theater scholar Herbert Blau emphasizes the importance of the human body in performance: no matter what the subject of the performance is, “it is the actor’s mortality which is the actual subject... for he is right there dying in front of your eyes.”30 Blau’s point, however artfully stated, is that performances require physical presence and (always-deteriorating) corporeality. However, I would argue that the fact of embodiment that Blau points to—the fact that living bodies are evanescent and impermanent—is also true of the texts that comprise the archive. In the service of describing a livelier, more active approach to archival research than tradition allows, I would like to open up the possibility of considering archival documents in terms of their performances.

Diana Taylor argues for the acknowledgement of expressive behavior (physical acts such as dance, ritual, and spoken expression) as a legitimate transmitter of cultural memory and cultural identity in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Distinguishing the realm of the discursive (with its authority of written texts) from the performatic (with its emphasis on transmitting knowledge through reiterative acts) would, to Taylor, provide a way to counter the colonialist tendency of written histories. Taylor is particularly concerned with describing a theory and methodology that account for performatic knowledge in Latin American culture and history.31 Her goal is to shift away from history based on texts and narratives and explore history through what she calls scenarios, or schematic plot-based scenes, with particular ends, relying on live participants.32

She accomplishes this goal within a broad conceptualization of performance. To Taylor, performances are not simply exhibitions of reiterative acts by embodied actors; rather, performance is “a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment and
a means of intervening in the world.”\textsuperscript{33} Within this expansive framework of performance studies, she wishes to interrogate the perceived rift between the “archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice / knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).”\textsuperscript{34} Acknowledging the legitimacy of the repertoire in academic work, she claims, also counters the privileging of Western thought found in the cultural studies tendency to treat everything as a text.

Though my engagement with the archive and the repertoire does not match Taylor’s intentions, I believe that these concepts can yield productive ways of thinking about archival music research. Though Taylor very much wants to keep the performatic separate from the discursive, I believe that much insight can be gained from acknowledging the performatic in archived texts. What I am proposing is not simply that we imagine the performances described or embodied within the texts (for example, the musicians who play a song on a sound recording)—but that we acknowledge the multitude of cultural performances that created the artifact, the performances that the artifact documents, the performances of preserving and using the artifact, and, finally the performances of the artifact itself (for example, the wearing of the pages of an often-read music biography or the scratchy sounds created by a flawed LP).

Throughout this project, I am proposing no less than the idea of an active archive. The collection and study of archival materials are performatic acts whose processes should be considered while engaging with the texts of the archive. Chapters Two and Three, with their focus on technologies of representation (press kits and fanzines, respectively), highlight the interaction between the archive and the repertoire in the particular ways that collection helps create certain performances. In the press kits of Chapter Two, the performances created are those of genre identity. In the zines of Chapter Three, the performances created are those of music
scenes across time and geographic space. Chapter Four’s teen-oriented artist biographies are pieces of the archive that are partially responsible for informing and influencing the repertoire of embodied acts: teenage music fans are encouraged toward certain behaviors in these texts and discouraged from others. In Chapter Five, I argue that the archive and the repertoire meet through the Long Distance Dedication letter as it describes physical absence and trials. Through the embodied practice of listening, radio listeners are brought together via the archived documents of the letters and the syndicated radio program.

In the pages of this study, tangibility now becomes more than simply a pleasurable facet of music consumption: it is the literal moment when the archive meets the repertoire. As Taylor points out, the archive and the repertoire, though often pitted as a binary of opposites to deconstruct (claiming the emancipatory effects of the repertoire over the repressive archive, for example), are actually interdependent and work in active exchange with one another.35

Here, it would be productive to examine another binary construct that is relevant to the popular music archive. According to Philip Auslander, although “live” and “mediated” have long been pitted as binary opposites, the contemporary cultural moment (which is heavily mediatized) offers the possibility that the distinction may be a lot more slippery than previously thought. Rather than mediated products’ (recordings or televised events) seeking to be authenticated by a live performance, it is just as often the case that live performances seek to authenticate themselves to a mediatized product—for instance, concerts that seek to replicate sound recordings and music videos.36

In Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture, Philip Auslander further problematizes the concept of performance by broadening its scope. Citing Sean Cubitt, Auslander discusses how the degradation of mechanically reproduced media artifacts effectively
creates a new performance each time the media are played. Extending his argument, it can be said that each “performance” of the grooves of a record, each handling of the pages of a fragile periodical reminds us that nothing is permanent—not even archived media.

Ultimately, the fragility of archived materials renders them as elusive, their presences as fleeting, as any live performance. The archive is not simply an imperfect way of capturing performances; it creates a performance wherein identity (Chapters Two, Three, and Four), genre, (Chapters Two and Three) (sub)cultural values, (Chapter Three) and community (Chapters Three and Four) are articulated. The performance of the record itself—and the rituals that surround its consumption (meditative listening, purchase of and care for records, vigorous debates amongst collectors)—is a conceptual area where performance studies can enrich our understanding of recorded music listenership. A researcher need not feel that a musical performance only occurs on stage in front of crowds of adoring fans. The archive provides a space for performance to be enacted more broadly: we can now consider the performances embedded in a recording or print medium, the performances of the recording or print artifact, and the performances involved in consuming the artifact.

Archival Materials as Technologies of Representation

Technology is the final theoretical component of my exploration of archival methods. In a keynote address at a 2008 academic conference, Philip Auslander further muddied the distinction between “live” and “mediated” by discussing the role of technology within performance. The perceived difference between a “live” performance and one that is mediated exists primarily because of our perceptions of mechanical reproduction. A concert environment, to us, seems more “authentic” than does a piece of recorded music or televised performance.
because of the immediacy of the live event. However, a live performance of music is equally mediated by technology—we just don’t recognize the mediation (or the technology).

He followed the reasoning found in philosophy of technology—that technology, derived from *techne*, which refers to craft or craftsmanship, is a much broader, more inclusive category than we often recognize. Certainly we notice that a sound recording played over a public address system is technology. But if we’re watching a live performance by a folksy troubadour strumming an acoustic guitar, we typically do not recognize that the guitar or the ballad structure is a technology. Both performances, however, are mediated through technologies.\(^{38}\)

In this project, I claim that both artist and audience identity are mediated through what I am calling technologies of representation. These technologies include performances in sound recordings, print materials, and any other objects into which meaning and identity are invested by artists, the music industry, music fans, or any other institutions or figures who play a role in shaping discourses around music practices. Technologies of representation are often tangible (CDs, band t-shirts) but can be intangible (the electronic press kit, a musician’s MySpace artist page).\(^ {39}\) Their meanings and significance can be widely agreed upon or can be hotly contested. Finally, the same technology can (and will) represent a musician or genre in different ways as the consumer of the technology or the context of consumption changes. A broad conceptualization of performance allows for richer, more lively uses and interpretations of the archive than does relegating performance strictly to the realm of physically present human bodies. So, too does a broad conceptualization of technology enrich the scope of analysis for archival researchers.

Music technologies are not simply synonymous with recording media (the wax cylinder, the shellac disc, the vinyl record, the magnetic cassette, et cetera). As I will discuss throughout this project, archived bits of ephemera (the press kits of Chapter Two, the fanzines of Chapter Three,
the artist biographies of Chapter Four, and the radio programs of Chapter Five) are themselves
technologies—with particular goals, uses, and representational practices. However, before I
proceed with a discussion of technologies of representation within the scope of this project, it
would be prudent to discuss several significant instances of past music scholarship that employed
archival sources and methods in analyzing certain historical technologies of representation.40

Speaking through the Traces: Literature Review of Notable Archival Music Studies

Among media scholars, archive research (broadly defined as using a collection of original
documents as the source of analysis) is one of the most frequently used research methods.41 In
popular music scholarship in particular, one would be hard-pressed to find a study that does not
employ archival sources or methods in some capacity: artist biographies, discographies, and
institutional histories generally rely on piecing together primary sources to weave together a
cohesive narrative. For that reason, it would be tedious—if not entirely impossible—to rehearse
a list of works that have employed archival sources and methods in the traditional manner.

Genre histories also rely heavily on archival sources, and many are notable for the
exhaustive detail that the careful scrutiny of such archives allows. For example, Bill C. Malone’s
weighty tome Country Music, U.S.A. is noteworthy for its intensive engagement with the
“insufficiently utilized” Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song.42 Another notable
history of the country genre, Richard Peterson’s Creating Country Music: Fabricating
Authenticity, utilizes the Country Music Foundation Archives (housed at the Country Music Hall
of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee) to document the genre’s evolving styles of artist
presentation.43 In fact, for an institution to commit to the development and maintenance of
archives devoted to singular musical topics generally provides research fodder for a multitude of
scholarly works. In 2008, Indiana University’s Archives of African-American Music and Culture
was reinvigorated by a hefty grant from the Grammy Foundation—allowing for relevant monographs to be written on subjects ranging from jazz history, blues history, and the history of black women in music.\textsuperscript{44}

Rigorous engagement with primary sources is also quite common in histories of sound recording. Most sound recording histories are technology-driven accounts of the early industry that make extensive use of Thomas Edison’s personal letters and papers at the Edison National Historic Site.\textsuperscript{45} Frequently, studies that rely heavily on primary source documents from Edison’s estate run the risk of over-inflating Edison’s importance to the medium’s history. Worse yet, such histories might eschew any potential insights about everyday uses of sound recording in favor of writing accounts only of the technology, its privileged inventors, and its marketing and distribution.

In spite of these risks, there nonetheless exists a number of thorough cultural histories of sound recording that share values with this study in that they emphasize everyday performatic practices in their analyses—even as they utilize the archive for primary source material. For example, in his 2000 study \textit{Off the Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America}, David Morton points out that recording technologies are deeply embedded in what he calls the culture of recording: the meanings of the performances in and practices of creating sound recordings are shaped by (and, in turn, influence) recording technologies.\textsuperscript{46} Morton combines a history of the recording technologies themselves (the phonograph, studio and magnetic recording and re-recording, and dictation machines) with an account of the industries that propagated them. The uses of the technologies are of particular interest to Morton; he describes how everyday interactions with recording technologies ultimately decided the economic fates of these devices. Although of course cultural histories rely on the archive for
primary source documents, approach most cultural phenomena as texts to be analyzed, and themselves exist as part of the archive, it is nonetheless noteworthy that there are such fruitful performatic considerations in a number of cultural histories.

Embodied everyday practices interact with the machinations of industry in a number of cultural performances. Material culture is one locus of such interactions. As Tim Anderson argues in his book *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and the Postwar American Recording*, popular music scholarship too often ignores the material-cultural history and interactions of the recorded music object.47 His response is to foreground the recorded music object in case studies ranging from the material results of the American Federation of Musicians strikes in the 1940s to the “intertextual controversy” over versioned recordings of *My Fair Lady* to the interactions between home music spaces and the developing aesthetics of stereo and high-fidelity recordings.48 Anderson points out that the extant scraps of pre-rock-and-roll popular music are material reminders of the postwar transformation of sound recordings into the primary medium of music consumption. He writes, “[a]s primary indicators of popularity, trash, rubbish, and linings of thrift stores all have one thing in common: they don’t lie. In fact, this junk, whether it comes in the forms of shredded mounds of sheet music or abused Mantovani LPs, is literally the neglected materials that have made music popular.”49 Anderson’s insistence on the importance of studying the uses and abuses of neglected material scraps of popular music fandom is in keeping with the current study that similarly emphasizes both performance and tangibility of archival music sources.

Of all the various performances (of technologies, of industry, et cetera) surrounding the culture of sound recording, the everyday practices of music fans have been of particular interest to scholars. Traditionally, popular music studies as a discipline privileges the experience of
speaking with actual fans or audience members to gain insights into music fandom. However, what do you do when an audience is inaccessible? How does one recapture the experience of a musical moment when ethnography is not possible? How is the essence of music fandom, for example, or performance (especially mediated performances, like radio) represented in the archive? Employing archival methods in analyzing particular technologies of representation has provided historical audience studies with a means of reconstructing elusive musical experiences.

One of the oldest existing sources for studies of recorded music in American life is a 1921 collection of customer surveys commissioned by the Edison company, housed at the University of Michigan. These surveys asked consumers open-ended questions about their purchase and listening habits, and customers responded with detailed, candid accounts of how they listened to music on their Edison machines. In his 1999 book *Recorded Music in American Life*, William Howland Kenney makes extensive use of the Edison customer surveys, and they offer portraits of American listenership that are often delightful and charming. (Women, for instance, often personified their talking machines as masculine, referring to their phonographs by Edison’s name or as “my Edison.”) While it is important for the archival researcher to keep in mind the limitations of the archival sources (these surveys, for example, were likely filled out by older, stodgier listeners who favored the “old-time” music put out by the Edison company), the Edison surveys remain a rich source for studies of early recorded music consumers. They provide a way of capturing the essence of early listenership that, due to the unavoidable fact of audience mortality, is entirely out of the range of possibility for ethnographic methods. The current study seeks to capture the same kind of liveliness that scholars such as Kenney bring out of their archival source material.
However, the highlighting of liveliness in source material is not the only goal for this study. It is also my goal to be cognizant of critical issues of representation in the source material I employ. A major concern for archival researchers can be voiced in the question “What is left out of the archive?” For example, the experiences of marginalized groups may not be documented or preserved in the archive. Perhaps their musical practices relied on embodied practices such as dance, small-venue music performance, or performances shared only within homes or small communities. Perhaps creating sound recordings or other tangible texts was not economically feasible or simply not desirable for members of a particular music scene. Perhaps certain musical traditions were passed on through the repertoire of embodied practices (for example, one musician who shows another musician an instrumental technique particular to a local scene) and not through the archive.

Though it may not be the most desirable way to access the lived experience of members of these musical communities, it is nonetheless astounding what kinds of information can be recovered through creative use of archival source material. Critical arguments can be lobbied via reconstructions of music scenes, as in Mina Yang’s *California Polyphony: Ethnic Voices, Musical Crossroads*. For example, Yang uses the Los Angeles Police Department’s *Annual Reports* in Chapter Three (“A Thin Blue Line down Central Avenue”) in order to demonstrate how the police harassed the patrons of black-owned nightclubs on Central Avenue. By comparing arrest records for the police station located near Central Avenue’s black-owned jazz clubs with those of similar (yet white-owned) nightclubs in Hollywood, Yang argues that aggressive police presence around Central Avenue jazz clubs led to the demise of the clubs. Yang’s argument that racial profiling was considered a legitimate police strategy is more than supported by the fact that the LAPD kept records of arrests by race of perpetrator. Ultimately,
the police presence hastened the death of the short-lived Central Avenue bebop-influenced scene. As a result, West Coast jazz is often described as a Stan Kenton-esque composition-heavy subgenre; the influence of black artists is often overlooked in jazz historiography.51 The story of the West Coast jazz scene involves more than the legacies of embodied practices that live on in jazz styles passed from artist to artist: the existence of archived texts that discursively framed these musicians as little more than petty thugs and criminals both troubles and enriches the genre’s history.

The ability to reconstruct—through the traces left in the archive—the experiences of groups lost to ethnographic practices is one major advantage of archival methods that I seek to employ in this project. A second strength of the archive is its ability to speak to and speak of broad, imagined communities through scholarly readings of texts that address certain historical groups. While a lack of tangible materials documenting a particular scene (for example, “the Albany, Georgia amateur country music circuit in the early 1990s”) might prevent archival reconstruction in some cases, other visions of historic audiences remain available for scrutiny. How is “the American audience,” for example, or “the teen audience,” constructed in the materials found in an historic music archive? Chapter Four will return to the issue of the construction of audience in the archive in my analysis of teen-oriented artist biographies.

A stellar example of an analysis of a constructed audience is Keir Keightley’s study of the representation of the 1940s /1950s hi-fi aficionado in the consumer hobbyist magazine *High Fidelity*. A prominent theme in *High Fidelity* was the constant struggle over domestic space between the hi-fi consumer and his wife. While traditional phonographs had long been designed to blend in tastefully with middle-class home décor, the hi-fi phonograph consisted of highly visible (and highly unattractive) turntables and speakers. By focusing on the theme of marital
discord between hi-fi hobbyists and their wives, Keightley is able to lobby an argument about the gendering of music technologies and the expression of middle-class suburban disillusionment. Using an archival source that hailed hobbyists as a cohesive group, Keightley is able to draw conclusions about hobbyism and middle-class sensibilities at a macro level. This and similar studies that address an archival representation of an imagined community provide cultural scholars with additional lenses to view historical actors. The imagined community or imagined audience as seen through the archive is not the only way to interpret a particular group or phenomenon, but it certainly can create a valuable and insightful portrait.

I have discussed the archive in terms of the centrality of tangibility and the applicability of the concept of performance. Then, I introduced the concept of technologies of representation in the construction of artist and audience identity. Now that the present study has been situated within a collection of cultural histories with similar values and approaches, I will delve into its methodological details.

**Methodology: Institutional Details, Sampling Technique, Methods of Analysis**

**Institutional Details.** The bulk of the primary source material for this project comes from Bowling Green State University’s Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives. The Music Library functions as the university’s repository for over 60,000 musical scores, reference books, and music theory and literature books. The Sound Recordings Archives was created in 1967 as the Audio Center—a central location for patrons to access all the sound recording collections once maintained separately by university departments. Under the guidance of Audio Center head (and current SRA archivist) Bill Schurk, the Archives has grown to include approximately 1,000,000 items, making it the largest collection of popular music recordings in an academic institution in North America. In addition to its sound recordings, the archives also hosts a
number of special collections of other music-related material culture, including artist
biographical files, fanzines, uncataloged periodicals, and record sleeves.

My introduction to the SRA came in the form of a graduate assistantship. I spent a year
at the archives, often up to my elbows in records, CDs, books, and press kits. I sorted, counted,
cataloged, and filed. I clerked at the reference desk, pulled requested books from the stacks, and
shelved books with something akin to a religious fervor. In short, I became intimately acquainted
with the contents of all the collections. I frequently paused in my tasks to glance through
materials: whether it be an awesomely bad album cover that caught my eye or a lengthy
description of a filk song in a fanzine, I always found something “special” to exclaim over and
share with others. It is with this same spirit of excitement of discovery that I approach the
primary source materials for this project.

However, this excitement is tempered by caution. In Destination Culture: Tourism,
Museums, and Heritage, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett discusses the political implications of
collecting and showing cultural artifacts. Though her primary concern is with the ways that
displaying artifacts aligns with the disappearance of cultures and challenges the representative
agency of cultural actors (she refers to museums, for example, as “a form of interment—a tomb
with a view”), her cautions do have bearing on the current project.56 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett warns
of what she calls the museum effect—when the act of collecting and displaying a group of
objects runs the risk of “rendering the quotidian spectacular.”57 As I proceed with this study, I
do so with the assumption that the everyday objects of my analysis are just that—everyday
objects. There is a fine line between acknowledging the validity and vitality of archival sources
and imposing an insincere and unhelpful reverence onto them. I strive to approach these
materials in a manner that is properly appreciative yet critical, enthusiastic yet thoughtful.
**Sampling Technique.** This project requires rigorous source-oriented research wherein available documents serve as the project’s inspiration and impetus. Because of the unwieldy number of archival texts available to me, I will be employing systematic sampling techniques for each case study. In each case study, it is my goal to create samples of texts that are large enough to be representative of the general contents of each collection yet small enough to allow intense engagement with the materials. I aim to clearly describe my sampling technique in each chapter so that anyone trying to follow my work could replicate the samples. I do not selectively or haphazardly select texts for analysis; rather, my engagement with any archival source for this project will be thorough and methodical. I strive always to allow the texts to reveal their contents to the reader—*not* to glibly make claims on behalf of the archive and then locate texts that conveniently happen to support those claims.

**Reading Strategies: Semiotics and Representation.** This study follows the assumptions and conventions of the modern practice of semiotic theory, the development and practice of which in cultural studies is largely attributed to the work of Roland Barthes. Originally published in 1957, Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* consists of a series of semiotic analyses of popular cultural texts. While Barthes built upon the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in this piece, the major contribution of *Mythologies* was the introduction of investigating the ideological motives of cultural texts. Barthes analyzed the ideological functions of signs through his concept of the myth. Myth transforms ideas that are in the interest of a particular socially and historically specific group (at this moment in time, the bourgeoisie under the French capitalist system) into something that seems natural, inevitable, and taken for granted. Semiology is used to uncover these myths so that they no longer function invisibly.
In the latter half of the twentieth century, many theorists expanded, revised, and altered Barthes’ semiotic practices. For the purposes of this project, it is helpful to think of semiotics as a broad reading tool that simultaneously informs and is influenced by additional theoretical strands. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, a 1997 essay collection edited by Stuart Hall, essayists expand the realm of semiology by engaging a number of theoretical streams through the concept of representation. Representation, broadly conceived, is a signifying practice concerned with the production of meaning through language and discourses. Through this concept, Hall and the selected scholars are able to unite structuralist semiotic analysis with post-structuralist discourse analysis. The over-arching concept of representation offers a reading strategy for critical media studies and informs this study.

*Limitations.* The current study is no way definitive. It will not be the last word in archival methods for popular music scholarship, nor is it intended to be. It is likely that my samples might miss some worthy texts that I would otherwise have liked to include. It is likely that my reading of these texts might not be your reading of these texts. One might even argue that any study of popular music requires physical engagement with humans—that perhaps the archive is limited without extensive engagement with the repertoire. Nonetheless, it is my hope and expectation that this study will approach archival research in an engaging and thought-provoking manner. This study is an attempt to counter the stereotype of the antiquated, musty archive through intensive engagement with its texts and acknowledgement of its vitality over the course of the chapters. Now, I will discuss the contents of each chapter in turn.

“‘Ruffians in Ripped Jeans’”61: Identity and Genre Performance in Rock Press Releases

In this chapter, I explore artist representation and performance in promotional materials for rock artists. The SRA’s collection of promotional materials contains a wide range of artists
(currently over 17,000) and represents a wide range of years (from the early 1950s to the present). Many of these files come from the personal collection of Cleveland freelance rock journalist and photographer Anastasia Pantsios. A side effect of her career spent writing music reviews for the Cleveland *Free Times* and Cleveland *Scene* is the accumulation of unsolicited press kits from musical artists (both well known and unknown). Pantsios routinely cleans out her files and donates them to the SRA, where they are organized by artist and then filed. The unsolicited nature and the small intended audience (music journalists) of these materials do create somewhat of a paradox: an archive of disposable materials. The performances embodied in these materials are intended for limited purposes, audience, and time. How do their meanings change when they are consumed as part of a historical archive—as part of a series of authenticating strategies performed by artists and perpetuated by the music industry?

For this chapter, I have taken a sample of approximately 70 press kits for artists who self-identify as rock musicians in order to interrogate the meanings of rock music in contemporary culture. I argue that invoking certain signifiers (regional, national, genre-based, racial and ethnic, or sexual) functions as an authenticating strategy for these musicians—even if the language of the text mocks such strategies. Though rock and roll has traditionally been envisioned as a genre of music dedicated to personal freedom and freedom from rules, the narrow repertoire of artist self-expression described in these texts indicates otherwise. On the contrary, the rules of signifying the rock and roll spirit seem quite ironclad with little room for transgression—ironic, given that so much of the rhetoric surrounding rock music is about rebellion.

“*What Was I Sniffin’*”

Prior to the ubiquity of the Internet, these cheaply printed, amateur-assembled mishmashes of music reviews, local ads, and opinion pieces were major parts of non-mainstream
music scenes nationwide. A fair amount of scholarship already exists on the topic of zines, and much of it is celebratory work written by zine aficionados in the populist vein of cultural studies research. Stephen Duncombe, for example, in his 1997 book *Notes from the Underground*, writes that zines were inspirational outlets where “everyday oddballs were speaking plainly about themselves and our society with an honest sincerity, a revealing intimacy, and a healthy ‘fuck you’ to sanctioned authority.”

Through a thorough textual analysis, I will examine themes of activity versus apathy, inclusiveness versus fragmentation, and community versus scene exploitation in punk fanzine opinion pieces. These writings are highly entertaining and highly unique. At once both personal and public, the punk fanzine opinion piece says a lot about punk rock ethics and self-conscious punk identity. These pieces discuss what it means to self-identify with a community and create remarkable intersections between regionality and internationality in the punk community.

For example, in one rant, *A.D.D. Attention Deficit Disorder* editor Dave Disorder reflects on an unsuccessful punk show: “Back in April I got the crazy notion that I could put on successful punk shows in Tampa. Respected people I know failed at this several times, and trusted friends have told me that putting on shows is fuck’n backbreaking. You lose money, people hate you when you don’t let them in for free, and the kids don’t give a shit about the music, and they all want to kick each others ass.” Though Dave Disorder’s grievances are with the Tampa punk community and the lack of involvement in that particular scene, this narrative repeats itself across multiple rants, in multiple zines, representing multiple cities. The apathy of the punk community becomes both a local and international concern in these pieces; rallying against this apathy becomes part of the rhetoric of punk activism.
The Sound Recordings Archives fanzine collection contains approximately 2,500 music-related zine publications. The zines found in the collection cover a number of genres from a number of locations around the country, and they span the 1980s and 1990s. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the interaction between the local and translocal punk scene using long-running Columbus, Ohio zine *The Offense* as a regional sounding board.67

**How to Behave for Your Fave Rave: Policing Fan Behavior in Teen-Oriented Artist Biographies**

“The five guys absolutely love to perform,” gushes ‘N Sync ’N Detail, a biography of the late ‘90s boy band ‘N Sync. During one particularly memorable show, “[r]umor has it that J.C. almost missed a verse due to laughing! ... [and] ‘one time Joey picked up a bra and put it on our drummer’s head as he was playing. That was pretty funny.’”68 These lighthearted antics complement a particular performance of expected fan behavior from the teenybopper crowd—the giddy and easily dismissed doings of young women considered to be pre-sexual (screaming and flung undies aside). Compare the ‘N Sync concert description to a passage from a Mötley Crüe biography: “With the crash of every chord a new heart was captured, and any still undecided and of the female persuasion could always be converted after the show.” The band claims that they “‘get paid in flesh ‘cos our audiences are sluts, whores each and every one, male and female.’” 69

What is interesting about these two books is that, on outward appearance, they are nearly identical. Both have the candy-colored jackets, the full-color photos, and are penned in the enthusiastic tones that mark them as teen-oriented music biographies. This chapter is concerned with identifying themes in these and similar teen-oriented music biographies. What do they say about the (young, female) audience for which they are written? I contend that these biographies
say a lot about the American teenage music fan—as a constructed subject-position, not as an agency-possessing individual with unique experiences, likes, and dislikes.

Just as the press kits discussed in Chapter Two function as technologies of artist representation, so too do these music biographies represent the experience of popular music fandom. What is so carefully constructed in these books is not artist identity; rather, it is fan identity. A particular form of femininity is encapsulated in the neon colors, pull-out posters, and factoid boxes liberally splashed across the glossy pages of these biographies. The imagined reader is hopelessly devoted to her idols. She is either hyper-sexual (if she is a rock fan) or asexual (if she is a pop fan), and she eagerly consumes artist images and facts—perhaps more voraciously than she consumes the music itself.

I have obtained a sample of these biographies by browsing the holdings in the Music Library Listening Center. In the Library of Congress classification system, call numbers ML 410, ML 420, and ML 421 designate artist biographies. As I inspected each shelf within this call number range, I visually identified biographies that could be described as teen-oriented. Teen-oriented biographies typically declare themselves through their brightly colored jackets, unusual sizes, glossy pages, or low-quality paperback formats. Further, certain publishing imprints (such as the UK’s Omnibus Press) are known for youth-oriented “popular biographies” of artists. I was careful to include books from such publishers as I sampled. At the end of my visual sampling technique, I accumulated nearly 30 bios of artists from the late ‘70s to the early 2000s to scrutinize thematically. I am particularly interested in the ways that these bios show the gendering of popular music fandom and how teenage femininity is constructed and policed in the United States.
Empathy, Embodiment, and the Long Distance Dedication

Given that the syndicated countdown show *American Top 40* has been a staple of American radio since 1970, it would be difficult to find a music fan who has not either been a listener at some point in her or his life or at least heard of the show. According to *American Top 40: the Countdown of the Century* author Rob Durkee, the show’s most enduring, popular feature was the Long Distance Dedication (LDD). The format of the LDD is quite straightforward: listeners wrote letters to the host (for years, the mellow-voiced Casey Kasem) that recount a touching memory and request a particular song. Durkee estimates that the LDD served between 1500 and 2500 letters since 1978.

Throughout the run of *American Top 40*, the Long Distance Dedication segment letters generally followed the same stylistic format: an anecdote (usually laden with emotion), a reference to a special person, and finally a request that links a popular song to the person in question. For this chapter, I collected a sample of LDDs taken from Kasem’s initial stint as host (1978-1988) in order to uncover the themes that emerge in LDD topics and sentiments. The Long Distance Dedication segment frequently features stories about physical separation, physical trials, and the extension of the physical body. Much of my analysis is concerned with teasing out the implications of this insistence on embodiment.

In addition to the physical body so often described in the LDD, there is also a “body” of radio listeners to explore. Susan J. Douglas points to the intimacy of the act of listening itself as a powerful component of radio’s role in the lives of its listeners. In the introduction to *Listening In*, Douglas confesses that it “is, at times, a romantic book” in its exploration of the relationship between the radio and the audience. Just as Douglas claims that she in no way intends to gloss over the importance of the corporate structure of radio or radio’s role in perpetuating cultural
stereotypes or promoting consumerism, I too will allow these factors to take a backseat to this romantic connection between medium and listener, to “the silky nostalgia that swirls around [radio]” in my discussion of embodiment in the Long Distance Dedication.74

“Feels Good When You Palm It”75: Digital Consumption and the Internet Archive

Early in the project, I make a case for the music archive as a natural source of information-gathering about popular music due to its tangibility. Music consumption is about touching stuff and holding stuff just as much as it is about listening to stuff, it seems. How, then, do I account for the contemporary cultural moment, when digital downloads of music are (depending on whose report you read) either on the verge of overtaking CD sales or—especially in the case of illegal downloads—on the verge of toppling the recorded music industry in its entirety?76 In the concluding chapter of my project, I discuss the future of the archive—reconsidering tangibility, ownership, consumption, and what constitutes the archive itself.

Tangibility has traditionally been a large part of what makes recorded music ontologically unique, as I have argued. However, tangibility need not be limited to artifacts such as LPs or compact discs. In this chapter, I examine narratives of tangibility in contemporary writings about digital music distribution and the iPod. The relationships between listeners and their mp3 players are frequently described as intense and personal. Tangibility, I will argue, is crucial to this relationship.

However, tangibility need not be the factor that determines what makes music ownership and musical identity formation unique from consumption practices in other media. Today, it is easier than ever for popular music fans to express their musical identities and assert ownership over bands and artists through a number of Internet sites. Sites such as Last.fm store information about each user’s favorite artists, play counts of particular songs, and even user-generated genre
tags—thus creating an electronic archive of fan activity. As websites become cached, then abandoned, their traces live on, still accessible through search engines. The detritus of abandoned Internet sites—the shells of former incarnations of identities—live on indefinitely until the server or search engine cache decides to purge them. These traces of fandom, I argue, constitute the new archive. Preserving them electronically will be part of the challenge of contemporary music archiving practices. As a coda to the chapter, I will outline the challenges and potential oversights in the idea of the electronic archive. I will revisit the three theoretical considerations (tangibility, performance, and technology) and discuss embodiment as a theme that has emerged throughout the project.

I have now outlined the theoretical and methodological foundations of this project. In the subsequent chapters, I seek to engage with the active archive—to use my proposed framework to allow performances to unfold in these texts. My roles to perform will encompass those of facilitator, analyst, amused bystander, sympathizer, sometimes antagonist. Your performance as reader continues here.


3 I use the phrase “audile practices” as a deliberate nod to Jonathan Sterne’s discussion of audile techniques developed in the years just prior to the invention of sound recording. See Jonathan Sterne, The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 137-178.

4 In Chapter 4, I argue that teen-oriented musician biographies, as technologies of representation, play a part in the ways members of the teen audience construct their own identities within conflicting cultural discourses. Such strategies might be described as “technologies of the self,” which are outlined as one of four major technologies that Foucault claims that humans use to understand themselves. Though technologies of representation as I am describing them are related to both Foucault’s technologies of the self and technologies of sign systems, the phrase “technologies of representation” as I am using it is most closely related to theories of semiotics and performance and should not be considered a Foucauldian term. See Michel Foucault, Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.
5 Quoted in Eisenberg, 19.


10 Milano, 20.

11 Ibid., 18.


13 Ibid., 43.

14 Eisenberg, 16.


18 Thomas A. Edison, “The Phonograph and its Future,” *The North American Review* 126, no. 262 (1878): 530-536. Imagine a more depressing recording session than the one suggested. “Here, Grandma! I know you’re on your deathbed, but how ‘bout reciting a poem? Speak clearly, now; this is for the ages.”

19 Sterne, 288.

20 Ibid., 301.


22 Ibid., 19.

23 Eisenberg, 51.


26 Sterne, 327.


28 Ibid., 52-53.


32 Ibid., 13.

33 Ibid., 15.

34 Ibid., 19.


37 Ibid., 45.

38 Philip Auslander, Keynote address, Battleground States conference, Bowling Green, OH, February 23, 2008.

39 At the time of this writing, MySpace was the second most popular social networking site on the Web, receiving traffic from approximately 60 million unique visitors a day (compared to Facebook’s 140 million). MySpace’s music-oriented user pages create a virtual environment where both famous and completely unknown musical acts of all genres can share their music with users. See John C Abell, “MySpace Lays off 30%, Braces for Comeback Battle,” Wired.com Epicenter, http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2009/06/myspace-lays-off-30-braces-for-comeback-battle/ (accessed October 9, 2009) and Josh Belzman, “Bands and Fans Singing a New Tune on MySpace,” Msnbc.com, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11114166/ (accessed October 9, 2009).

40 For the purposes of this study, a historical archive refers to any collection of original documents or data from which a scholar takes a sample of texts. Archival research is by design systematic, thorough, and flexible. See Jane Stokes, *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 109-114.

41 Stokes, 109.


47 Anderson, xxxv..

48 Ibid., xxxiv-xliv.

49 Ibid., xxiv.


57 Ibid., 54.

58 Stokes, 109.


The title of this chapter is taken from an undated press release for The Vacation. Ink Tank PR, “The Vacation,” n.d. Artist Biographical Files, Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives, Bowling Green State University.


Though the two papers were once competing alternative weeklies, Times-Shamrock Communications purchased both papers in 2008. They ceased publication of the Free Times and essentially folded its operations into the Scene. See John Booth, "Late News," Crain’s Cleveland Business, June 23, 2008, final edition, Lexis-Nexis, via Maurice, http://maurice.bgsu.edu

This title was taken from a column by editor Dave Disorder in the zine A.D.D. Attention Deficit Disorder no. 3 (1997): n.p.


SRA holdings of The Offense came from the personal collection of the zine’s author, Columbus punk scene veteran Tim Anstaett.


Ibid., 91. The Long Distance Dedication segment ended when Ryan Seacrest took over hosting duties in 2004.

The Sound Recordings Archives has a large portion of American Top 40’s run on record, but the holdings are incomplete. In addition to the SRA’s holdings, a number of radio stations nationwide are now hosting blocks of American Top 40 broadcasts from the 1970s and 1980s that are available to stream online.


Ibid., 7. Douglas also uses Benedict Anderson’s notion of the imagined community to describe the early national radio audience. To Anderson, nationhood is an imagined comradeship; key to the development of nationhood was the spread of the newspaper, which addressed readers as citizens of a nation and thus served as a tangible representation of nationhood. Douglas argues that radio, too, created an imagined community. Though the imagined community is perhaps a helpful concept in conceptualizing the national radio audience, my focus in Chapter Five is on individuals united through embodiment—not on an imagined community of listeners. See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 2006).


CD sales have dramatically declined in the past several years as digital downloads have sharply increased. However, the digital download is not as profitable an item for the recorded music industry as is the physical compact disc. Much industry hand-wringing remains to be seen before a definitive sales model emerges. See Knopper, 239 and Ethan Smith, “Declining Music Sales Threaten the Future of the Music Industry,” in What Is the Future of the Music Industry?, ed. Roman Espejo (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2009), 10.
CHAPTER II: “‘RUFIANS IN RIPPED JEANS’”¹:
IDENTITY AND GENRE PERFORMANCE IN ROCK PRESS RELEASES

The purported author of a May 2001 Dreamworks Records press release for alternative rock mainstays Eels is a self-described rapper by the name of DJ Killingspree who thanks the group “for rocking my motherfucking world.” He describes the forthcoming album, *Souljacker*, as “the hardest rocking substance known to man.” The band members, according to DJ Killingspree, “come together to blow hard—HARD like a mystical trumpet playing from a hard rockin’ land. HARD like a rock baking in the desert sun. HARD like the heart of a teenager stuck in Nowheresville.”²

On the surface, this narrative’s deft use of language meant to signify authentic rock experience is completely in line with the formal conventions of the rock band press release. The artist is a spokesman for the American experience. The album in question is, of course, the same quality product you’ve come to expect from the artist—only better, bigger, and more awesome than the last. Finally, the author presents the material in the form of a swear-laden testimonial: the language is informal, enthusiastic—the words of an excited friend who wants you to like the same things he likes.

Of course, the press release in question is notable because it pokes fun at each of these conventions even as it employs them. DJ Killingspree is, by all accounts, completely fictional, and is used as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the band’s authenticity—in invoking the language of hip-hop street cred for a band of pasty alterna-rockers in order to show the ridiculousness of such authenticating claims. “People been bitin’ their style for a long time and that’s fine,” he writes. “But show them some respect and they will continue to drop some serious science on your heads.”³ This text’s parody of the authenticating claims of the hip-hop genre suggests a witty
self-awareness on the part of the author and the band itself: by mocking these markers of authenticity, the band appears to be distancing itself from the game of trying to be cool. However, the self-awareness illustrated by this text itself neatly functions as an authenticating strategy for the alternative rock genre. In other words, one way to prove authenticity in this context is to demonstrate that one is simply too cool to prove authenticity.

In this chapter, I wish to explore artist representation and performance in promotional materials for rock artists. The content of the Souljacker press release hints at some of the issues inherent in such a study: the ideological territory staked out by rock music in contemporary culture, strategies and meanings of authenticity in rock music, and the implications of gender and race representations in rock music. I will argue that, no matter how authenticity is invoked (even if it is mocked or disavowed), the language and presentation of artist promotional materials code rock music as an aggressive, white, masculine enterprise. Ultimately, I contend that these promotional materials shape the discourse of popular music at the level of media gatekeepers and thus insidiously contribute to the ongoing marginalization women and people of color in contemporary rock music.

**Rock Narratives in a Unique Collection: The Bio-Files Archive**

Before I proceed with my thematic analysis of the content of these materials, it would be prudent to pause for a moment and consider the Sound Recordings Archives’ collection of press kits and promotional materials as a whole. In *All Area Access: Personal Management for Unsigned Musicians*, Marc Davison states that a press kit is a “multifunctional media package … [it] acts in many ways as the representative of the band, and its overall appearance and contents will be the basis on which your band will be judged.” Press kits typically contain a band biography, an 8 x 10 glossy band photo, press clippings, a discography, and press releases
designed to capture the attention of music journalists and concert promoters. “An effective press kit can work wonders for you,” writes Ty Cohen in a how-to guide for self-promoting musicians. “A bad press kit works against you and usually ends up in the trash, often without even being opened or read through … a well-done press kit stays behind to promote your band long after you have shaken the club manager’s money-grubbing hand and gone home.”

Cohen’s point about the press kit’s winding up in the trash is important to consider. Cultural gatekeepers—including Arts and Entertainment editors, concert promoters, and freelance journalists—received hundreds of unsolicited press kits each year. For the most part, the contents of these press kits are gone and forgotten by the time the office recycling bins are emptied each week. But what happens when these materials are preserved? What can they tell us about the music industry and the culture at large?

The SRA collection of press kits and promotional materials is largely the result of the efforts of Cleveland music journalist and photographer Anastasia Pantsios. Over the course of her twenty-plus year career as a freelance writer (contributing often to once-competing alternative weeklies the Cleveland Free Times and the Cleveland Scene), Pantsios has amassed an impressive list of publications, both regional and national—as well as an impressive collection of press kits. As a personal friend of SRA archivist Bill Schurk, Pantsios routinely donates promotional materials to the archives when she no longer needs them. Her donations have contributed to a considerable collection of press kits that are now housed in a long, precarious galley of filing cabinets in a first-floor room of BGSU’s Jerome Library. The promotional materials are not formally catalogued; rather, these items are simply filed by artist name. Schurk keeps a list of the artists who are represented in the collection. It is a substantial
list numbering well over a thousand artists, both unknown and well-known. With each subsequent donation from Pantsios, the list of artists continues to grow.7

My introduction to these materials came when I worked in the archives as part of my graduate assistantship. A shipment of promotional materials arrived from Pantsios—in several large boxes—and I was tasked with organizing them by letter and eventually filing them among the others in the first-floor collection. It was a demanding, interesting task. As I filed and smoothed creases in the papers, I became fully absorbed in the materials. I saw hundreds of press releases for hundreds of different artists—yet I couldn’t help but notice that no matter what music genre was represented artist by artist, I was, in fact, reading the exact same press release over and over. There were identifiable authenticating strategies, nearly identical narrative patterns, and identical poses and expressions in artist photos.

Unsigned musicians and major record labels alike understand that their chances of getting noticed in the daily barrage of press kits are slim. The authors of these press kits feel compelled to provide a new twist on a recognizable formula—they must allow gatekeepers to see that they fit into genre conventions yet that they are unique in some way that merits attention or accolades.8 I noticed this strategy particularly among artists who self-identify as rock musicians. In the press kits, they strongly desire to be seen as an “authentic” representation of rock music while at the same time distancing themselves from the need for external validation by emphasizing that they are carefree rebels who play by their own rules. Apart—as part of the music journalist’s everyday routine of junk mail, deadlines, and tight schedules—these press kits are nothing special. Taken together, they form a narrative of proving rock authenticity—often through resorting to clichés and stereotypes—all in the service of grabbing gatekeepers’
attention. These strategies constitute a certain performance of genre. It is to the issues of
performance, genre, and authenticity that I now turn.

Performance, Authenticity, and the Semiotics of Genre

An artist’s sound recordings have long been regarded as the primary text of popular
music. In other words, audiences come to know a music artist through her or his recordings, and
other texts—particularly visual or written texts—are considered secondary or supplementary to
establishing an artist’s identity to her or his fans.9 Visual presentation, however, still figures
prominently in artist identity and in the perception of artist authenticity by audiences; the visual
component of an artist’s identity is as crucial to our perception of that artist as are the formal and
technical characteristics of the music.10 Of course, the idea that artists must present themselves as
visually authentic to a genre is nothing new. In Creating Country Music: Fabricating
Authenticity, Richard Peterson devotes a great deal of discussion to the importance of visual
markers of authenticity among early country music performers. Dress styles (ranging from the
old-timer to the cowboy) and expressive authenticity in performance styles (such as the humble
demeanor expected of a country artist) are among the semiotic markers of country music cited by
Peterson as traditional signs of authenticity.11 Artists must signify country by taking marks of
tradition to establish credibility while staying original enough to show that they are not
“inauthentic” copies. Peterson refers to this process as the fabrication of authenticity. This
seemingly contradictory phrase embodies the idea that authenticity is a social construct that
appears to be natural, and it “is continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between
performers, diverse commercial interests, fans, and the evolving image.”12

A number of scholars (including Peterson, Roy Shuker, and Philip Auslander) have
emphasized the deliberate nature of discourses of authenticity and the ways that the concept of
authenticity is tightly bound with industry. To Roy Shuker, distinguishing “authentic” rock music from “commercial” pop music is fruitless—largely because both genres are equally commercialized. The concept of authenticity, does, however, serve an ideological function in rock music.\(^{13}\) Auslander writes: “I treat rock authenticity as an *ideological* concept and as a discursive effect … I posit that the creation of the effect of authenticity in rock is a matter of culturally determined convention, not an expression of essence. It is also a result of industrial practice: the music industry specifically sets out to endow its products with the necessary signs of authenticity.”\(^{14}\) I contend that the promotional materials I examine in this study are just such examples of the authenticating practices of the music industry. “Rock” in these press releases and artist bios is not simply a genre of music; it is an ideological stance. The industry capitalizes on the discourses of rock authenticity that circulate in these promotional materials. Ideologically, rock music in these press releases claims to be rebellious. In practice, of course, rock music is anything but—like any other product for sale, it puts money into the pockets of the corporate overlords whose company names grace the letterhead on which these press releases are printed.

This is not to say that the artists who appear in these press releases—and the audience who enjoys and identifies with these artists—are nothing more than the dupes of the capitalist system in which rock music becomes meaningful. Here, I return to the concepts of performance and technology. Press kits are functional technologies that serve the specific purpose of promoting a certain vision of artist identity to cultural gatekeepers. However, these photos and descriptions do not simply reflect instances of the repertoire being imperfectly and formally frozen into the archive. It is my belief that these fixed media technologies take on a life of their own. They broadly constitute tangible performances—not only of artists and of the rock genre, but also of the persistent and ever-present press kit itself. Promotional photos, too, are visual
performances of artist identity and of genre. Following visual culture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, I claim that promotional photos are “vital signs… not merely signs for living things but signs as living things.” These ideas—that these technologies of representation embody a performance of artist identity and that we can understand the semiotics of genre through these materials—underline this chapter.

Figure 1. Where does Cannibal Corpse (left) end and Aborted (right) begin? These technologies of representation demonstrate the semiotics of the death metal genre. Accessed via Google Images.

To briefly illustrate what I mean when I say that technologies of representation embody a performance of artist identity and demonstrate the semiotics of genre, allow me to provide an example of two technologies of representation: photos of the death metal bands Cannibal Corpse and Aborted. A metal subgenre known for its heavy distortion, tempo changes, and guttural vocal style, death metal has a very particular representational strategy. Death metal songs frequently use images of physical violence and decay in order to comment on the inevitability of earthly mortality. To reflect the grim realities explored in the subject matter, the physical bodies of the death metal band members are plainly and similarly adorned: black t-shirts and jeans are common, as are long, straight hair and beards. In death metal band photos, arms lie at the sides or crossed in front as markers of stoic masculinity; there is typically no motion implied by the pose—and certainly no antics reminiscent of hair metal. In other words, the presentational styles
displayed by the artists in these technologies of representation are part of the performance of the artist’s identity. Whenever I see a photo of five men standing shoulder to shoulder wearing black shirts and jeans against a gritty background, and some of them have long hair, and there is one bald guy with a beard, I assume—usually correctly—that the men in question are a death metal band because they are performing that identity through those markers. In turn, after looking at dozens of photos of death metal bands that look similar to these two photos, I begin to identify the semiotic markers (body language, hair styles, dress styles, photo backgrounds, even the band names themselves) that constitute a performance of the death metal genre.

The process of casually identifying genre markers that I have just used with the death metal genre is the same process I used to select press kits to scrutinize for the rest of the chapter. After casually reading hundreds of press releases representing various musical genres, I selected a sample of 50 to analyze by theme. These 50 artists who self-identify as rock musicians represent the contemporary moment in rock music (for the purposes of this study, the last ten years of data available, roughly 1998 to 2007). Self-identification is an important component of this analysis. Regardless of my own beliefs about whether an artist should be classified as a rock musician, it is significant in each instance that the author of the materials has chosen to describe the artist in the context of rock and roll. It must be said that the sample is imperfect, subject to the whims of the fate that brought each file to the archives. Still, when taken together, the files in this unwieldy pile of documents say a great deal about contemporary popular music and American culture. It is to the contents of these promotional materials that I now turn.

**Findings by Theme: Press Releases and Place—America and Rock Music**

A press release promoting Australian band Spiderbait’s 2004 album *Tonight Alright* describes the band’s trip to the United States to work with producer Sylvia Massy Shivy. “At
first, we were stressed out about going to America to record,’ admits dummy/frontman Mark ‘Kram’ Maher. ‘You hear about bands punching each other out, spending all their money, and going home broke.’17 The performance of rock and roll in these promotional materials is a performance of place as much as it is a performance of a musical style. Most of the bands or artists highlighted in these promotional materials are from the United States, but as the Spiderbait example shows, the idea of America as the undisputed yet troubled home of rock and roll is on display even in press releases about non-American bands. The version of America presented in these press releases is one that is status quo (all the better to rebel against!) yet firmly blue-collar. America is the home of the real people, just as rock and roll is the music of the real people.

The identity of rock and roll as a distinctly American creation with distinctly American meanings is firmly embedded in the language of these texts. A press release for 3 Doors Down, for example, takes the idea of the fundamental American-ness of rock and roll to dizzying heights of solipsism. The album Away from the Sun promises to allow the band “to take their rightful place in the forefront of a musical resurgence they helped create … [t]he band humbly calls it ‘good ol’ American rock ‘n’ roll.’” How exactly did 3 Doors Down create the rock resurgence? Why, through the massive popularity of their 2000 hit song “Superman,” of course. “The song struck a huge literal and figurative chord with the populace, a full year before America truly needed a superhero. But who knew that then?”18 That rock music is described simultaneously as an uncanny prognosticator of the needs of the American psyche and as a salve for the wounds of the American populace after the exceptional tragedy of 9/11 further reveals the depth of the discursive connection between America and rock and roll in these texts.
Equally prominent among these press releases is the recurrence of the theme of America as a mythic origin: the specificities of the connotation of “America” are often elided in favor of using the word to efficiently signify an artist’s distinct, authentic entry into the world of rock and roll by birthright. Rock and roll is located unquestionably in various, colorful descriptions of the American landscape, and American identity unquestionably grants legitimacy to rock artists in these press releases. To the Yayhoos, the spirit of American rock and roll is embodied in the one’s eternally car-repairing neighbors, “the guys who were always out in their driveway working on their ’72 Camaro . . . [who] would crank tunes on the shitty AM-FM car radio or of course the 8-track.”19 To New American Shame (whose band name already suggests a preoccupation with the American rock and roll experience), America is the suburbs… “[t]he world of manicured lawn [sic] and multiple step-parents, of generic tract houses and jacked-up Novas.” This is where rock music has stayed alive, according to this 1999 artist bio. Guitarist Jimmy Paulson says, “Rock n’ roll has been like a cockroach hiding under an empty pizza box, in the suburbs, waiting for grunge to die down so it can breed again.”20 And apparently, when rock and roll breeds, its offspring might resemble Butch Walker (who “got fucked by every style of rock music while growing up, and this is what popped out”) or Jackyl frontman Jesse Dupree.21 “‘Jackyl is real America,’ Dupree declares. ‘People who work for a living, people who watch NASCAR and wrestling, they don’t care about trends. They want to rock. When you go to a Jackyl show, you’ll see a kid with a Slayer shirt right next to a guy twice his age in a Hank Jr. shirt. That’s what it’s all about.’”22

One particularly striking artist bio (for TRUSTcompany) invokes a mythic version of America even as it literally locates the band on a map of the United States. The band’s “journey” to its major label affiliation in Los Angeles (including a stint in the studio with producer Don
Gilmore) is traced across the map. There are literal locations on the map—each paired with a brief narrative about the city’s national significance and band’s relation to the city—that work to ascribe authenticity to the group. For instance, Washington, D.C. has a spot on the map that touts the city as “our nation’s capital, home to our Federal Government, including our President George W. Bush.” It is also the spot where TRUSTcompany released two albums on independent label DCide Records. “The loud-soft guitar riffetama and impassioned vocals on tracks like ‘Falling Apart’ also suggest the influence of classic D.C. post-punkers Fugazi,” the bio states. Here we see the use of location to define the band ideologically—they lived in D.C., but they are not fans of the government—and to borrow authenticity from perhaps the best-known political band in the region, if not the nation.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 2. I hear America singing in this TRUSTcompany bio. Geffen Records, “TRUSTCO,” 2002. Artist Biographical Files, Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives, Bowling Green State University.

This bio also employs references to mythic American locations that are well known to rockers everywhere: Rock City, U.S.A., Heartbreak, U.S.A., and ‘The Road,’ Anywhereville, U.S.A. TRUSTcompany has honed its rock songcraft on the road, which is described as “[m]ore
a state of mind than a state per se. ‘The Road’ has proven to be a haven of literary influence, inspiring great works of art ranging from Motley Crue’s ‘Home Sweet Home’ to the acclaimed film Almost Famous.”\(^\text{24}\) While the strategy of emphasizing the unique American origins of the artist is deployed in a particularly bold manner here, emphasis on the American-ness of rock and roll can be found in numerous texts across the sample.

**What about Phoenix? Press Releases and Place, Part 2: Rock and Region**

“Seattle. Athens, Georgia. Detroit. New York. Montreal. In the last two decades, each city has been lauded as the next rock ‘n’ roll capital. But what about Phoenix? That heated Arizona metropolis is home to one of the most important and prominent rock scenes in the country, starting with platinum rock gods Jimmy Eat World.”\(^\text{25}\) So begins a press release for the band Fivespeed. Rock authenticity is not just a matter of expressing American identity; it can also be ascribed to any and every region and scene in the nation—no matter how unlikely or uncool it might seem. Why Phoenix? Why not?

Throughout the sample, the unique relationship of rock and roll to the American landscape plays out in regional signifiers. For some artists, claiming authenticity of origins involves identifying with a particular region. For others, rock and roll identity is forged in the utter rejection of the place one was born—and in the utter rejection of the values that are apparently embedded in the region. Regardless of the motives behind the performance of place in these texts, *that location signifies* is apparent throughout.

“When a band hails from the outskirts of Detroit Rock City you can bet your ass that band has rock ‘n roll pumping through every ounce of its being.” So begins a biography for the band Dirty Americans. “In a world of prefabricated, preconceived so called rock bands, Dirty Americans are truly a breath of fresh air: they kick out the fucking jams with reckless, ruthless
abandon, with little regard for trends or pretense.” 26 This is one of several mentions of Detroit Rock City in these press releases—which tend to eschew references to Detroit’s Motown-era history in favor of rhetorically aligning the artists with bands like Detroit’s MC5 (as seen in the “kick out the jams” reference in the Dirty Americans piece). Detroit, here, comes to signify gritty, grime-covered (white) rock authenticity. In fact, in Dirty Americans’ rockin’ romantic tale of how the band came together (“Piper placed an advertisement on a Detroit music web site for a drummer”), it is revealed that the band name came from the drummer’s wish to be “[j]ust some dirty American rock band.”

Romanticization of region—and emphasis on the exotic nature of the region—are also common in bios for bands from the South. Texas, for example, is often deployed as a self-explanatory semiotic marker—to evoke everything from literal and figurative largeness to the purity of country life. A biography for Beaver Nelson states that the singer is “worthy of fame the size of his state” and that “an unmistakably Texan soul” resides underneath Nelson’s fiery performances. 27 Moreover, an artist never forsakes his or her Texan identity, even if what they do could be considered a radical departure from Texas’ musical heritage. The Von Ehrics, for example, “had been raised on two things: the country and gospel music that they were fed as little Texans (and is somewhat of a birth-right based on location) and the punk rock and metal bands they found as rebellious teenagers.” The Von Ehrics’ music is “in your face, Texas-styled country punk rock and roll.” 28

Southern signifiers in press releases are also deployed to evoke a sense of exoticism or mystique in the artist’s style or origins. The Mojo Gurus “cut their teeth in Florida’s seedier rock and blues clubs and quickly earned a reputation based on their hot and nasty live performances. See, the Gurus play good ol’ American hoodoo voodoo, born on the bayou style rock-n-roll with
This exoticism is, of course, racialized in this instance. The references to “seedy” blues clubs, “hot and nasty” performances, and “hoodoo voodoo” all work to stereotype and fetishize black sexuality even as they erase any literal reference to blackness. The simultaneous exoticization and erasure of blackness in discourses about rock and roll is a recurring theme in these press releases that I will return to later in the discussion.

The disavowal of region is just as common of an authenticating strategy as is regional identification. While many artists in the sample are often comfortable identifying as an American rock band, playing good ol’ American rock and roll, they also require some form of alienation in order to rebel properly, as rock tradition dictates. In spite of the Rockwell-esque associations of the Midwest as the quintessential American location, it is the very American-ness of Middle America against which artists are often said to rebel in a number of these press releases.
St. Louis takes a beating in more than one text. At age 10, twin brothers Ben and Steve Tegel from the band The Vacation “moved to ‘the generic, sprawling, suburban wasteland surrounding St. Louis… ‘I couldn’t stay in the Midwest,’ says Ben. ‘I knew I was either going to move to New York or LA. There’s something about LA, though—it emits this warm, radioactive glow that seems to attract all of the people who are looking for something else.’” Another band that was looking for that elusive “something else”—that followed an identical path to Los Angeles—is Living Things. Their bio begins with a paragraph comprised of one long sentence:

If you grew up in St. Louis and your name is Lillian and you’re a guy, and you don’t give a crap about The Rams or The Cardinals or The Blues or any of the college teams, and you especially don’t give a crap about anything the jocks in your high school do, and you’ve got long hair that connotes The Stooges and not Lynyrd Skynyrd, and you like to read books that no one assigned, and you refuse to read books that were assigned, the authorities will want to print a tattoo on your forehead that says ‘Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder’ and force-feed you Ritalin until you can properly regurgitate trigonometry.

The author’s insistent placement of the words suggests exhaustion. The rock-savvy audience of this narrative (assumed to be music journalists or concert promoters) is supposed to identify with this problem child, to understand what it’s like to be the outsider. Here, St. Louis signifies the bland status quo—the aggressively masculine, anti-intellectual jocks.

Ike Reilly’s bio also equates rock and roll with dissent. “Rock ‘n’ roll is not about being an outsider; rock ‘n’ roll is about feeling like an outsider. When you spend just about your entire life in Libertyville, Illinois, as Reilly has, you’re supposed to be a worker, not an artist.” What is interesting about Reilly’s bio is that while Reilly disavows the Midwest, he also is content to
remain there. He says, “I was always the guy who wanted to get the hell out of town and would listen to music as an escape. In a song you can be anywhere… I haven’t left anything or anyone behind to go to L.A. or someplace to do this.” The key to this simultaneous regional disavowal and acceptance lies, I think, in the use of rock and roll to align oneself with the marginalized—in Reilly’s case, with his working-class friends with whom he hangs out at the bar. “‘[S]o many of my songs are about being a loser, it’d be difficult to write them if I actually succeed,’” 32 he says in the bio.

In bios such as Reilly’s, we see how the authenticity of origins in regional discourses about rock music is interwoven with rock authenticity as ideology. For the rock artists described in these promotional materials, identity is forged in the thick sludge of American childhood and adolescence—in being shaped by the cultural objects and ideas around you even if you reject them outright. It is to the ideological component of rock authenticity that I now turn. What does it mean to be a rock and roll band in this contemporary moment? To the artists who are trying to make a name for themselves in the music business, what are the values of rock culture… and what do these values say about American culture at large?

If You Can’t Fuck or Fight to It33… Rock and Roll Ideology in Press Releases

By selecting bands that self-identify as rock bands for this chapter, I have considerably narrowed down what could be a large, unwieldy sample. If rock music is seen as the default, broadly inclusive designation for any number of styles and subgenres, then “rock” ceases to be a meaningful term. If, however, we think of rock music as an ideological designation, then suddenly the term ceases to be generic. 34 I have found over the course of this study that bands that self-identify as rock artists do so quite deliberately. The designation of “rock” means
something in the contemporary moment, and what it means among the bands might be described as variations on a theme of proclaimed individuality.

“‘We’re in rock ‘n’ roll,’ says lead vocalist Ali McKinnell of U.K. born Electrasy, ‘because we don’t have to conform. No one can tell us what to do. It’s sheer expression, from the heart. It’s license to thrill.’” These are the opening lines of Electrasy’s bio, and they speak of the ultimate goal of the rock musician: to sincerely express oneself “from the heart,” which will authenticate a performer to his fans. This relationship between honest self-expression and a sense of realness is historicized by Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity*. He claims that it is no coincidence that the beginnings of the modern notion of sincere self-presentation can be said to go hand-in-hand with the flourishing of theatre in Western culture around 1600. Of sincerity and everyday life, he writes, “[i]n this enterprise of presenting the self, of putting ourselves on the social stage, sincerity itself plays a curiously compromised part … we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic.”

What is so interesting about Trilling’s discussion of sincerity in this passage is the emphasis on the *perception* of sincerity and insincerity, of authenticity and inauthenticity. Members of a band—like Electrasy, in this example—must convince fans and potential listeners that they are, in the immortal words of *Bye Bye Birdie* crooner Conrad Birdie, *honestly sincere*. But the process of authenticating rock ideology involves more than simply speaking from the heart. Electrasy’s bio goes on to ask,

How rock ‘n’ roll is Electrasy? Well, Nisbet was once married to a Hungarian porn star. And when McKinnell first met Arista chief Clive Davis, he’d just stumbled drunk off a plane from Glasgow and, not knowing who the legendary
Davis was, kept calling him ‘Mike’ throughout their first meeting apparently because Davis resembles an actor on a popular British TV series.37 Apparently, the authentic rock star must choose an appropriate mate. How better to authenticate oneself as a rock star than to insist that a marriage to an adult film star is a measure of how rock and roll one is? The insistence on flouting authority—in this case, in humorously insulting the head of the very label that gives you money—is not unique to the Electrasy file. Chris Lee of the New Orleans-based Supagroup, in a press release for their album Rules, claims that the “‘main theme of the record is the rejection of real life, its responsibilities, and especially its rules … we write our own rules.’ Adds Benji [Lee], ‘I have a boner just thinking about it.’”38


Lee’s boner may very well be worth discussing. Though I will return to the issue of gender in rock press releases in the next section, it is worth saying that masculinity is firmly embedded in the ideology of rock that surfaces in these promotional materials. In the world of
press releases, a rock artist is honest, open, sincere. He expresses himself openly, *but only to the extent* that his thoughts are in keeping with what we can assume is the unbridled id of rock and roll. In fact, the sincere self-expression of other rock artists is often the subject of mockery in artist bios. Another Supagroup press release emphasizes the band’s insistence on having fun. “This explains the band’s impatience with an unnamed nu-metal band in ‘One Better.’ [Chris] sings, ‘*What makes you think I give a damn / Why your daddy made you cry?’* As Benji succinctly puts it, ‘When music is whiny, I tune out.’” 39 New American Shame, a band I have previously mentioned, also bashes sincere self-expression in another rock sub-genre, alternative rock: “Throughout the album, it’s clear that New American Shame flat-out reject the sober earnestness and bleak worldview of post-Nirvana alternative rock. Rather, anthems like ‘Sex Teen’ and ‘Rather Be Rich’ focus on the classic thematic components of heavy rock: cars, girls and rock n’ roll itself.” 40

The expressive quandary of a rock artist—walking the fine line between expressing oneself freely and sincerely as an individual without being branded as whiny (feminized)—is eerily similar to the constraints of masculinity writ large in American culture. The grand narrative of rock emphasizes its freedom, its fearlessness. In a bio for his band Revolution Smile, Shaun Lopez claims, “[r]ock music is supposed to be dangerous. It takes chances. It’s not afraid.”41 However, given the limited range of sincere expression for artists in discourses about rock music, it is quite easy to claim that most rock musicians do not take chances. The genre rules concerning masculine self-expression are iron-clad and seldom transgressed.

“‘We’re Not about Making an Issue of It’”42: Female Artists in Rock Press Releases

As a qualitative researcher whose heart lies in the discipline of cultural studies, I generally do not believe in the power of numbers to substantiate claims I make when writing. However, there is one number I have kept in the back of my mind throughout the researching and writing of this chapter—the number five. Of the 50 press releases I selected for this project, I was only able to locate five artist promotional packets that detailed the careers of female rock artists or even groups with female members. Female representation in rock musicianship has long stalled at the stage I call the “what about” stage. Sure, the proportion of female to male rock artists might be staggeringly small. “But what about Heart?” one might ask. “What about Lita Ford? What about riot grrrl?”

What indeed. Since I was able to collect only a few promotional materials for female rock artists, I can mention each act individually. First, I located a bio for Three5Human, who is said to play “guitar driven rock with a politically and socially bent lyric edge.”43 The group is a duo comprised of guitarist Tomi Martin and vocalist Trina Meade, whose “strong voice is like a siren delivering a message to all that listen and truly hear.” Three5Human also has the distinction of
being the only African-American rock act in the sample. It is interesting that the only AfricanAmerican rock act—and one of the few rock acts to feature women—is also one of the few acts in the sample that identify as politically aware or politically progressive. (Even the group’s name is consciously political: it references the 1787 Three-Fifths Compromise between southern and northern states that dictated that only three-fifths of the slave population would be counted for the purposes of determining official population.) The relative absence of African-American artists in what is by all accounts a genre with African-American origins will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, but first I would like to consider the political dimension of gender in rock identity.

The second of the five female acts in the sample is a band called Halfcocked, who, according to their bio, “sounds like AC/DC and ABBA having a bar fight.” Three of the five members of the band—the vocalist, the bassist, and one of the guitarists—are female. The band, according to the bio, has a penchant for “tackling taboo subjects—from sexual freedom (‘Devil Shoes’) to sex toys (‘Thanks For The Ride’) to the universal battle for integrity (‘Sell Out’).” In spite of the inherently political nature of a female vocalist writing and singing songs about sexuality, the band bio is quick to point out that Halfcocked just isn’t that kind of band.

“[Vocalist Sarah] Reitkopp often writes from a deeply personal point of view, but her songs are not bound by gender concerns. ‘The girls in this band are just as important as the guys … [w]e’re not about making an issue of it.’… echoes [drummer Charlee] Johnsson, ‘Ultimately, we all have the same strengths and weaknesses, regardless of gender.”

What is striking about the Halfcocked press kit along with the remaining three female rock artist bios is how emphatically sexuality is deployed in creating artist identity. Is this strategy little more than cheap gimmickry, or, as The Moaners’ bio claims, does it reflect “an
exuberant expression of freedom and sexual emancipation from a distinctly female perspective?"45 However one chooses to interpret the insistence on sexuality and sexual desirability in these materials—an insistence that I maintain is not found at all among the male artists—that this insistence on sexuality is so palpable in these press releases is noteworthy. The very first sentence of The Moaners’ bio describes them as “a female rock duo that manages to capture the unapologetic sexuality of Polly Jean Harvey with the raw amplified blues of the Fat Possum crowd.” The equation of sexuality with the “rrounss” of the blues mirrors the simultaneous erasure and exoticization of blackness I discussed concerning the Mojo Gurus’ bio. I will return to this issue in the final section of the chapter.

Figure 6. Halfcoocked is definitely not making an issue of the whole gender thing. Dreamworks Records, “Halfcoocked,” n.d. Artist Biographical Files, Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives, Bowling Green State University.

The Moaners aren’t the only ones doing some moaning in this sample.46 I also located a press release for “Chattahootchie Guitar Queen” Moanin’ Michelle Malone that uses a remarkably similar formula to that of The Moaners’ bio—even down to the monikers laden with
sexual innuendo. “[T]he boys’ room was one stall short when it came to letting a ‘lady’—particularly a ‘lady’ with the seductive licks and sultry looks of Michelle Malone—seize the stage,” Malone’s bio states. “Defiantly she simply flipped her hips, licked her lips and moved forward remaining ever faithful to her guitar and main squeeze, Jezebel.”

Of course, untamed feminine sexuality needn’t be confined to the stage. The bio for pop-punk band Betty Blowtorch claims that the ladies occasionally flash passing trucks when they’re out on the road. “‘Bianca has been known to form a convoy behind her,’ laughs Judy. ‘It can sometimes get out of hand.’”

What else can we expect from Betty Blowtorch? They are, after all, “[f]our foul-mouthed, power-tool crazy rock ‘n roll hussies who will fix your car and then hump you on top of it!”

I want to make it clear that I am not condemning any of these artists for their playful use of sexuality. After all, who doesn’t love a car hood-humpin’ gal with automotive skills? I do, however, find it very interesting that sexuality figures prominently in fully four of the five press releases for female artists in the sample. If aggressive individualism is the authentic mode of self-expression for men in the discourse of rock, it may be said that raucous sexuality seems to be the authentic mode of female self-expression in rock culture. Just as the emphasis on often-childish solipsism limits and constrains how we conceive of masculinity in rock culture (and in the culture at large), insistence on one-dimensional sexuality constrains potential female self-expression both in rock and in American culture.

Let’s Go See That White Kid Rock! The Absence of Blackness in Rock Press Releases

As I have suggested several times throughout the chapter, acknowledgement of race is conspicuously absent from the vast majority of promotional materials I have read for this chapter. Rock and roll is discursively a white domain; its African-American origins are rarely if ever discussed in these texts. Blackness is hinted at—as I have mentioned before, bios for artists
like the Mojo Gurus and Michelle Malone often deploy the stereotypical semiotic markers of *the blues* to evoke raw sexuality—but it is almost never acknowledged overtly within the confines of these press releases, and it is never discussed in the context of rock and roll.

Cultural perception of blackness in rock music has a troubled history. Discussing the equation of blackness with sexuality in early rock and roll, Simon Frith writes: “The racism endemic to rock ‘n’ roll, in other words, was not that white musicians stole from black culture but that they burlesqued it. The issue is not how ‘raw’ and ‘earthy’ and ‘authentic’ African-American sounds were ‘diluted’ or ‘whitened’ for mass consumption, but the opposite process: how gospel and r&b and doo-wop were *blacked-up.*”⁵⁰ This “blacking up” of African-American musical styles for the white audience might be described as the mid-twentieth-century version of black minstrelsy. The appropriation of blackness in this case is one of exaggerating blackness—not to belittle it, but to invoke an authenticity that is fabricated and highly problematic.

I argue that, in the confines of this sample of press releases, rock artists—who are playing what is assumed to be a white, working-class style of music—often borrow authenticity from the blues, which is always described as *related* to rock music but still a distinct, *black* genre. For example, more than one of the artist bios in the sample referred to the legend of bluesman Robert Johnson. The 3 Doors Down bio (remember them? They humbly play “good ol’ American rock ‘n’ roll”) emphasizes that the band’s hometown, Escatawpa, Mississippi, is “a mere hellhound’s leap from the crossroads where Robert Johnson sold his soul.”⁵¹ In Kid Rock’s bio, African-American influence and the influence of country music on the development of rock and roll are roughly equivalent: “‘Country and blues is the biggest shit ever,’ Rock says, ‘and it always will be. I’m talking about the Stones, Skynyrd, Zeppelin, the biggest bands that ever were had a country and blues influence, that’s where it all stems from … [t]his common thread through
music was the blues. And country’s just the White Man’s Blues.”52 Rock also enthuses about old-school hip-hop, claiming “I just cannot outgrow that … there’s just something about that era that I can’t get rid of.” The narrative shows that rock music—thought of as white music with some black influences—is always in danger of growing stale. The genre relies on pioneer poachers like Kid Rock in “raising the ante for the rest of today’s rock ‘n’ roll.”

Conclusion

In the introduction to Black & White & Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism, Paula Rabinowitz discusses the insight into American culture that we can gain from the study of film noir, which she refers to as “black-and-white lenses into the 1930s and 1940s.”53 Rather than viewing the films as texts through which she can gain insight into American culture, she sees “film noir as the context; its plot structure and visual iconography make sense of America’s landscape and history.”54 I believe a similar claim can be made about the press releases, artist biographies, and promotional photos I have scrutinized over the course of this chapter. Because Mythic America figures so prominently into the master narrative of rock and roll, I believe that we can see the United States in these texts. The myth of limitless freedom persists, yet we are tightly bound in the cultural conventions (or genre conventions, in this case).

The biographical information contained in these promotional materials is widely available in numerous print publications and Internet sources to any music scholar or fan. What is unique about this collection is not the actual accessibility of the information: it is the fact that these pieces of purposeful artist self-representation exist in one location. The values of the rock genre—and their interesting and sometimes uncomfortable conflation with American values—are revealed in the promotional materials archive simply by dint of their preservation. In the course of their active duty as needy heralds of greedy record companies, press kits and
promotional materials are typically thought to be so dismissible that they often do not even merit attention from their intended audience. I argue that the actual, tangible collection of these materials allows a narrative to emerge from what would otherwise be a hodgepodge of ephemera—disposable, seemingly unrelated, easily ignored pop music detritus.

I have explored the semiotic markers of the rock and roll through careful analysis of the performances embedded in promotional materials. I have argued that rock and roll is an ideological territory upon which white masculinity has largely staked its claim. Though dissent and rebellion are part of the myth of rock and roll, artists usually play it safe by performing the familiar: cocky individualism (for men) and brazen sexuality (for women). Further, the history and discourses of rock literally whitewash over the influence of African-Americans and ignore the contributions of any other racial and ethnic minorities to the genre. I am not suggesting that every process and practice that we see embodied in these promotional materials necessarily reflect the machinations of the culture at large (though some might argue that the values of a genre cannot help but mirror or critique mainstream values). I am, however, wondering if perhaps we’ve taken Van Halen’s assertion that there’s only one way to rock a bit too literally. Surely this messy and malleable art form can and will continue to allow transgression and change.

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1 The title of this chapter is taken from an undated press release for The Vacation. Ink Tank PR, “The Vacation,” n.d. Artist Biographical Files, Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives, Bowling Green State University.


3 A simple Google search reveals that DJ Killingspree exists only in the realm of Eels’ publicity for Souljacker.


It is worth mentioning that freelance music journalists are sometimes paid to write artist biographies on the side— thus complicating the relationship I describe between gatekeepers and those who are trying to grab their attention. However, the authenticating strategies employed in artist biographies tend to transcend authorship given the anonymity of press release authors (who are typically uncredited). For the purposes of this study, questions of press release authorship are not really a concern. I am interested in how these texts deploy language and imagery—not in who is responsible for this deployment.


Richard A. Peterson, Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Part II is concerned with the visual creation of authenticity, while the origins of the humble, down-home country persona can be found in Peterson’s discussion of Depression-era radio barnstorming in Part III.

Ibid., 6.


Auslander, 70.


Of course, genre rules and markers are constantly up for debate. Perhaps the reader might object to my description of death metal and the functions of its semiotic markers. Perhaps the reader might wag his or her finger and argue that Aborted (this photo circa 2007) is a more of a Deathgrind / grindcore band than a death metal band. I am using these photos merely as examples and claim no expertise on the subject of death metal. For a detailed exploration of the genre, see Natalie J. Purcell, Death Metal Music: the Passion and Politics of a Subculture (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003) or Garry Sharpe-Young, Death Metal (New Plymouth, New Zealand: Zonda Books, 2008).


Universal Records, “3 Doors Down,” n.d. Artist Biographical Files, Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives, Bowling Green State University. An additional note about punctuation: though in the body of the paper, I am referring to “rock and roll” in its widely used popular music publication format, I have retained the original spellings and punctuation of the phrase in each of the press releases. Though the end result is not consistent, I feel that this retention helps maintain the integrity of the data.


Ibid. I have maintained the original spelling and punctuation found in the bio.


The rest of the sentiment basically states, “then it’s no good.” This sentiment showed up in multiple press releases and bios within the sample.

In Liveness, Auslander summarizes the works of several writers—including Keith Negus and Lawrence Grossberg—who discuss the difficulties inherent in conceptualizing “rock” broadly. Auslander ultimately concludes that rock music is defined ideologically distinctly from pop music: fans perceive it as authentic and sincere while pop music is inauthentic and insincere. (81-82).


42 “It,” of course, being the whole women-in-rock thing. This quote is from Dreamworks Records, “Halfcocked,” n.d. Artist Biographical Files, Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives, Bowling Green State University.


46 By this point, I myself was doing a lot of groaning at the representations of femininity in the sample, which is not to be confused with moaning of The Moaners and Moanin’ Michelle Malone variety.


49 This line is apparently reflects the enthusiasm of Kid Rock’s early African-American fans. It can be found in Atlantic Records, “Kid Rock,” November 2001. Artist Biographical Files, Music Library and Sound Recordings Archives, Bowling Green State University.

50 Frith, Performing Rites, 130-131.


54 Ibid., 14.
CHAPTER III: “WHAT WAS I SNIFFIN’”: RANTS, RAVES, AND SCENES IN PUNK FANZINES

They fill five tall filing cabinets in the back of the archives. Each piece sits in an unassuming manila folder. The changing scrawl on each hand-labeled folder is testimony to the long-term nature of zine cataloging: workers come and go and file industriously during their time at the archives, but the fanzines stay in place, largely silent until you thumb through them and witness the creation of scenes in their pages. A casual glance reveals tales about good shows and bad shows (mostly bad shows) and essays commending scene unity or disparaging scene cliques (mostly cliquishness). Zine editors describe making copies of their projects at work, paying for professional printing, or scamming free copies from Kinko’s. In the pages of these music fanzines, there are accounts of dead scenes and thriving scenes from Missoula, Montana to Johannesburg, South Africa. Music zines document the activities of like-minded individuals who come together to consume the same genres and opine on how they are articulated and deployed both locally and globally. In fact, the creation of a zine is an example of cultural activity described by Simon Frith as a means of coming to understand scene values. “[Scene participants] only get to know themselves as groups . . . through cultural activity, through aesthetic judgment. Making music isn’t a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them.”

Music scenes are the spaces (both physical and virtual) where a group of like-minded people forms a community around a particular music style. In punk and hardcore scenes in particular (where the do-it-yourself approach to music and community building is one of the core scene values), fanzines are another way of living ideas rather than simply expressing them. In other words, the piles of back issues and mailing materials congregating in cardboard boxes on a zine editor’s bedroom floor prove ownership of a scene and authority to speak of a scene’s
values. In this chapter, I will explore the themes of scene inclusion and exclusion in punk fanzine opinion pieces. I argue that zines are tangible instruments of inclusion in a music scene. As technologies of representation, they demonstrate dedication to a scene and in fact are partially constitutive of scene identity—particularly when considering the performances of scene identity embedded in the materials themselves, involved in the creation and distribution of the materials, and described in the materials.

**Zines, Scenes, and Teens of All Ages**

Music scenes can be geographically isolated to a single locale (for example, a particular town or region). Scenes can also exist in the virtual sense. In the absence of a single geographic space for scene activity, scenes can flourish in the written materials and recordings created by participants. One such tool used in the creation and maintenance of a music scene is the fanzine (typically abbreviated to “zine”). Stephen Duncombe describes zines as "noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves."³ Though one might argue that progenitors of the modern zine have existed since the chapbooks of Shakespeare’s time and the nineteenth-century leaflet, scholars generally acknowledge that fanzines as we know them came to be in the 1930s. Science fiction zines were started as a means of keeping characters alive and active through fan-written stories.⁴

Since the 1930s, zine creators have written zines on hundreds of topics—from the most mundane everyday narratives to the most esoteric and hard-to-classify fan practices. By the early 1980s, as copy costs fell and the home computer started its slow crawl into American households, zine publishing expanded rapidly. Thousands of cacophonous voices in zines across the country (and worldwide) formed a largely underground network of contributors, distributors, and readers.⁵ Due to the underground status, small circulations, and sporadic serialization of
most zines, estimates of overall numbers of printed zine titles ranged from 10,000 to 50,000, while overall zine readership was estimated to be about 500,000. The late 1990s saw the advent of electronic zine publishing. While some e-zines replaced print zines, other virtual zine spaces worked to supplement the presence of print zines—making zine archiving even more challenging and zine readership even more difficult to estimate.

In the late 1990s, music zines (which focused on a specific performer or genre—most frequently, punk or alternative rock) comprised the largest zine genre in the United States. The do-it-yourself (DIY) style of fan participation encouraged by print fanzine culture proved to complement the punk rock genre especially well. It was within the punk music subculture that DIY zine design practices (photocopied images appropriated from mainstream media, handwritten or cut-and-paste lettering, hasty typing and foul language) formed a unique and recognizable aesthetic that broadcast punk subcultural values to the culture at large. The handmade features of punk zines (for example, crossing out typos or correcting mistakes with markers) and the often sarcastic appropriation of images and texts from mainstream media (for example, tongue-in-cheek usage of headlines or photos from teen magazines) worked to critique mainstream media much the same way that punk strove to exist outside and in opposition to mainstream culture. So, too, did the DIY practices of independent zine distribution and low cover costs exhibit punk rock’s anti-capitalist values: zines were (and continue to be) labors of love—not profitable ventures.

Given the iconic aesthetic of visual rebellion developed within punk fanzines, it is no surprise, then, that scholars have turned to the idea of subculture to describe zines and other cultural practices of the punk rock scene. Many such scene studies rely on Dick Hebdige’s influential 1979 book *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* to connect DIY scene practices with the
symbolic forms of resistance found in punk fashion. Hebdige theorized that the distinctive visual styles of Britain’s punks and teddy boys were fashioned to protest the values of the dominant culture. These working-class youths politicized their own identities by making their deviance hyper-visible in order to disrupt conventional social codes. Though Hebdige’s articulation of music subcultures has received its share of criticism over the years, it has nonetheless remained relevant to studies of contemporary punk scenes and their methods of cultural production. Zines neatly fit into the model of the spectacular punk subculture: the images and texts appropriated from other media, the opinionated rants and often foul language, and the hastily penned editorials all function as symbolic acts of resistance to mainstream media writing styles and production values.

However, using the notion of punk subculture to explain the zine phenomenon does reveal a few potential problems. For example, even within music scenes with demonstrably progressive or anti-capitalist values, not every participant has the same reasons for embracing the scene or the same dedication to the scene’s values. It might not be correct to assume that all scene participants are actively dedicated to subcultural values. Further, by reading resistance into every subcultural gesture (putting out a zine, going to a hardcore show, buying a 7” single from an independent band), we do risk romanticizing these activities—seeing a glorious, rose-tinted anarchist revolution in accounts of crusty liberty spikes and dumpster-diving freegans. In Notes from the Underground, Stephen Duncombe tempers his enthusiasm for the emancipatory potential of zines with a warning that alternative culture is frequently co-opted by the mainstream. However, in spite of the ever-present possibility of capitalist absorption of alternative media, Duncombe maintains that zines do offer an alternative set of values to those
promulgated by mainstream consumer capitalism. "It is an alternative fraught with contradictions and limitations . . . but also possibilities," he writes.14

Given these potential contradictions, perhaps a more fruitful way of looking at punk zines is simply as one of many productive activities of the punk and hardcore music scene. Richard Peterson and Andy Bennett define music scenes as “contexts in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans collectively share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others.”15 Though the idea of a music scene may seem broader than the notion of subculture, scenes offer an axis of analysis not necessarily described under the umbrella of subculture: an emphasis on social and cultural production. Scenes imply organization, labor, and systematic creation—all a vital component of zine production and its community-building function—while subculture can sometimes refer simply to a set of shared values.16 Also, the idea of scene does not carry with it the same connotation of perpetual teenage and young adult rebellion that subculture implies. Certainly, music scenes (and the punk scene in particular) are inhabited by young people. Yet, for every youthful gaggle of X’ed-up teens at a local all-ages show, there is an “old guy” counterpart sporting both a mohawk and a middle-age paunch. The concept of the music scene has room for all.

A number of scholars have studied site-specific music scenes; typically, such studies are primarily ethnographic and rely on scene artifacts (records, zines and newspapers, lyric sheets and set lists) as supplemental source material. Two prominent scene ethnographies are Sara Cohen’s Rock Culture in Liverpool and Barry Shank’s Dissonant Identities, which followed the development and interactions of a number of scenes in Austin, Texas.17 Shank devotes a chapter of Dissonant Identities to the self-conscious construction of the Austin punk scene in the late 1970s, and punk scenes have been studied in traditional ethnographies, virtual ethnographies,
and by scholars using archival methods and sources. Rather than taking an ethnographic approach to scenes, this chapter analyzes an archived body of scene artifacts. Studying the documents of a particular scene and the conversations that occur among scene artifacts allows meaningful comparisons between punk scenes. What common narratives emerge when examining documents from scenes that are geographically separated yet united by shared values?

For the purposes of this chapter, the global punk scene can be described as a translocal scene—a number of local scenes in regular contact with one another through the exchanging recordings, merchandise, and fanzines. Though members of this scene can and do share certain punk values, these values are never static and always contested. In addition to serving as mouthpieces for broadcasting scene values, zines also perform in the translocal punk scene as physical commodities of community building ... and their creation and distribution is a means through which zine producers perform scene identity and demonstrate their dedication to the scene.

Though the punk scene as constituted by these zines is a translocal one, each individual zine documents the practices and history of a local or regional scene. It would be a mistake to simply assume that the translocal punk scene is nothing more than the sum of the activities of local scenes all over the nation or world. Rather, the local and the translocal interact in meaningful ways through the narratives printed in these zines. As the zines demonstrate, there is a lot at stake in these interactions between the local and the translocal. On the one hand, community members want their scenes to thrive and be recognized. On the other hand, too much recognition (in the form of “sellout” bands with major label record deals, for example) is considered destructive to the scene and an active denial of the scene’s values. As these zines will
demonstrate, punk rock is often a volatile and precarious negotiation of progressive politics, loud music, community building, and individualism.

**Sampling Method and Themes**

The SRA fanzine collection contains over 2,500 titles representing genres from filk music to death metal. There are fanzines devoted to subjects ranging from technological hobbyism (an 8-track aficionado zine) to single-minded fan adoration (a French-language Bob Dylan zine that I, against my better judgment, spent the better part an hour chuckling over in spite of its complete lack of relevance to my own project). I employed a systematic sampling technique: For each letter of the alphabet, I located five zine titles that were devoted to punk and hardcore scenes specifically. I was primarily interested in “rant” columns and personal essays—particularly when the rants were about punk rock or the state of the writer’s home scene. This method yielded 117 total pieces, which I narrowed down to 77 pieces. The pieces that comprise this sample represent scenes from all over the United States … a few parts of Canada … a couple of regions in Europe … and one community in South Africa. The earliest essay I located was from 1981, and the most recent essay was from approximately 2003. Though the sample contains pieces from many years in between these two dates, I estimate that the median year represented is 1996. These scenes are scattered across the globe and across the last two decades of the 20th century, yet I found that the authors of these pieces experienced many of the same frustrations and voiced similar sentiments.

As performances of scene identity, these essays explore the politics of scene inclusion and exclusion. Whether the authors are lamenting their own exclusion from the punk community or drawing a firm line about the kind of behavior that belongs in their scenes, there is always an act of self-separation or identification in these writings. In the next section, I will discuss the
significant dualities that emerge in these materials: activity versus apathy, inclusiveness versus fragmentation, community building versus scene exploitation, and substance versus style. Finally, I will discuss the zines as sites of interplay between the local and the translocal in punk scenes.

Get Off Your Ass and Do Something! Activity versus Apathy

DeLand, Florida. A local venue called Brodie’s had recently closed down, and a promoter named Chris was saddled with the responsibility of trying to book local punk shows at other venues. Apparently, the shows were not going as smoothly as everyone would have liked. Blasting some unnamed scenesters who lamented the sudden downturn in local shows, essayist Buddah B wrote in *Deadbeat*: “What are you doing besides bitching? It is difficult to hold shows when people come to the venue not wanting to pay to see the bands, but bitching when we don’t have a place to hold shows.” Elaborating on the challenges of planning a show’s lineup and location, he adds that “[s]ome people don’t want to drive more than 10 minutes to see a show. What a great asset to the scene these guys are.”

According to many of these writers, apathy is one of the biggest problems faced by scene participants. It is no surprise that these zine contributors would take this issue to heart; after all, however modest they might consider their writing efforts to be, these written words do constitute scene activity that required intense work. A number of writers describe how they fight their own tendency to procrastinate and contend with work schedules and late-night deadlines in their introductory remarks. In these pages, the difference between an active scene and a dead scene is often described in terms of individual efforts to contribute to a scene: if staging shows, writing and distributing zines, and selling recordings and band merchandise are the forces that drive the
scene, apathy and lack of support are the friction that threaten to cause the whole enterprise to grind to a halt.

In this context, complaints about scene apathy can function as performances of both inclusion and exclusion. Weighing the scene’s tendency toward apathy against the collective activities of its members reflects the importance of a particular scene’s continuation: quite literally, if there is no activity, there is no scene. Claiming worry about the state of a scene’s activity is one way a writer claims investment and inclusion in the scene and adopts scene legitimacy. Conversely, writers also use tropes of scene apathy to distance themselves from and exclude scene members whom the writers see as dead weight in the community. In other words, the same apathetic people who take a scene’s existence for granted “are the ones who say the scene sucks.”22 To these writers, only those who contribute to the scene should be allowed to criticize it.

Viewing their works as a vital part of the scene, zine editors claim that supporting the scene means supporting zines as well as bands. Instances where zine writers do not receive support from fellow scene members can lead to bitter feelings of detachment from the community. Cincinnati zine contributor Sally Tampon shares a story in Cleveland zine *Suburban Subway* about a disappointing benefit show for a local club (the S.O.B.) where she sold only four copies of her zine. “You can support your music but you can’t support the zines that give you exposure,” she writes. “And especially this one guy, Jeff Wonderly, gave something like 1,000 bucks to the S.O.B. which we think is really cool, if I had the money I would do it too. But any ways, he can give away that much fucking money to the club but can he spend the 2 bucks for my zine? Hell no. What a fucknut.”23 In an editorial about the difficulties he faced putting out his zine—right down to fighting the harsh winter weather to copy and distribute his zine—*Right
**Path** editor Josh echoes, “Sometimes I wonder why I even bother trying. It’s like, I do a couple shows, distro some shit, put out a few tapes, do a Zine that I love and what am I left with? A Zine that people read and say ‘eh.’” Such descriptions of a lack of support or appreciation for their efforts often betray a feeling of powerlessness. A scene member can put out a zine or book shows, but she cannot make others care about her efforts. “Fine, fuck you all,” continues Josh in the editorial. “If you don’t appreciate it, I’ll let the big rock promoters decide what shows you get to see.”

Not by accident, the same attitudes or incidents within a scene that cause writers to rail against apathy in the first place—lack of support, lack of a sense of unity or community cohesion, being the victims of discrimination by authority figures—often wind up causing feelings of helplessness and dejection and further fuel apathy in what can only be described as a feedback loop. In a letter to Miami, Florida zine *Suburban Relapse*, a reader speculates that apathy results from punks’ own infighting and from being a popular target for petty police harassment. Describing an incident where cops pulled the plug at a local punk show because of a minor fistfight that occurred before the music had even started, the reader states, “I still can’t figure out why they were such assholes last nite but Rage told one of them that he took *CHiPs* too seriously. She just might be right.” He goes on to speculate: “What all this (the fights, hippies, & cops) can cause is a numbness in the scene. It’s a numbness that seems apparent in LA and the effect can be an increase in the apathy that already abounds.”

Those who describe themselves as fighting the good fight in spite of the apathy that plagues their scenes often playfully challenge others to put up or shut up. A column in Pennsylvania zine *PTYMzine* (Punker than Your Mother) exhorts Pittsburgh scenesters to get with the program: “We need more bands and not just shitty bands, but more better bands …
What’s the worst that could happen? Either you practice a lot and become really big or you sound like shit and everyone laughs at you.”27 The writer reminds the community that with no involvement, there is no scene. “Now I know what your thinking ‘Fuck him, I can write a better zine than this piece of shit… So prove it, stop complaining and do it. It’s not gonna hurt you, only make you broke.”28 Kentucky zine I Stand Alone printed the content of a flyer that an unnamed friend handed out one night to scene members in Louisville. The flyer laments the lack of involvement in the local scene and complains that certain “scene gods” are constantly responsible for resurrecting the scene when it lies dormant. The author hopes that his words may annoy others into action. “This little letter may sound ignorant to you or maybe you think I am stupid, but that’s great. Please get involved to correct my mistakes, because it would only help the scene … at least somebody cared enough to try to do something.”29 This commentary on apathy always accompanies a scene-building effort on the part of the authors. Their activity, however imperfect or incomplete, is construed as a positive act.

Zines can function as instruments of inclusion in more concrete, practical ways as well. For example, a 1995 issue of Broken Routine Fanzine outlines the history of a Sonoma County (California) organization known as the Independent Arts Coalition. Founded with a goal of putting on local punk shows with low overhead, fair door prices, and fair terms for bands, the IAC used fanzines and local press to raise awareness of their efforts.30 Their efforts certainly did not go unnoticed: a description of the 25-year history of Santa Rosa’s The Last Record Store wryly remarks that the IAC held “approximately 237 benefit shows” in 1995.31 The IAC seems to have no presence currently; but for a couple of modest mentions in this zine and the local entertainment paper, it has left behind no trace of all those collective efforts to create and sustain a scene. In many cases, scene artifacts tell us just as much as about a punk community as does
the recollection of a scene’s former members. When we view a tangible scene artifact, we are witnessing the end results of someone’s effort to make a difference, to make a mark on the world.

The fleeting nature of scenes explains why there is such urgency in these writings that rail against apathy. No scene is guaranteed long-term viability, and it is the tangible efforts of these writers that often help participants feel as though the scene has some sticking power. A column by Bob Swift in New York zine Hanging like a Hex praises the kids from the Rochester scene who attend shows in both Rochester and Syracuse “[c]onsistently, en masse.” The Rochester scene, too, could be sustained by such positive attitudes and activity. He entreats readers not to simply wait for change to occur but to enact change in the scene collectively. “We have only a finite time to get what we can from life so why not go out and get it? And if we can’t do it alone, why not do it together? It is in community that we will find the resources and determination to make change.” In the end, apathy kills community, while activity sustains it.

**Way Too Confusing and Yes, Cliquey: Inclusiveness versus Fragmentation**

For many of these writers, one of the big disappointments with their scenes comes from the splintering of the community into factions based on what they believe to be unimportant differences in dress and other subgenre elements. The resulting fragmentation of the scene is viewed by many as counter-productive to the most important element of punk rock: the ideological component that emphasizes unity and community-based cultural production. A typical rant lists a handful of subgenres and compares them to immature schoolyard divisions: “I swear, punk has more cliques than my old high school! Let’s see, there’s pogo, crust, emo, grind, ska, pop, oi, powerviolence, etc, etc, whatever… you get the picture.” In fact, I noted ten separate instances of the high-school clique comparison among essays in the sample. The
pettiness connoted by this word choice—and the fact that so many people used the same word—makes it a particularly telling analogy of the fragmentation many felt within the punk scene.

Feelings of exclusion also tend to accompany complaints that the scene provides a space for elitist community members to judge others in the scene based on the legitimacy of others’ values or actions. The fact that such judgments are typically reserved for a few commonly derided capitalist activities (for instance, judging people for purchasing CDs by major-label punk acts) while other system-supporting activities go completely unnoticed is a source of frustration for many writers. “To add to the punk scene’s elitist nature is its hypocrisy and dillusional sense of autonomy. So often do I hear tirades against the government, huge corporations, barcodes (what the fuck??), and other so-called representations of evil,” writes columnist Phat Rob. He exasperatedly points out that most scene activity requires the system’s resources in any number of ways that are conveniently overlooked by the most judgmental punks … “BUT you cannot under any circumstances sign to a major record company. Wow. It’s good to see that all you punkazoidz got your priorities straight. I salute you. Up the system, dude.”

The result of the blindly judgmental scenesters’ gaining authority within the scene is further splintering of the community—either because some well-meaning people will be judged “not worthy” of the scene or because they will consciously reject the scene if they feel unfairly judged.

The worry concealed within these rants about the fragmented scene is that the community will become identical to the non-punk status quo, complete with an elite inner circle of exclusionist snobs. In an editorial in Phoenix zine All the Answers, Irwin writes, “You can bill yourself as the biggest individual thinker, and non-conformist but what all you’re doing is creating your own little punk rock fraternities and sororities and it’s just the same bullshit wrapped differently.” Another essayist calls out the punk scene for being just like everyone
else: “Long gone are the days when I was naïve enough to believe that I would encounter any sense of warmth or welcomeness at a punk/hardcore/emo/bullshit-core show, it’s just different costumes and the same cold uncaring human beings, wow that’s a little harsh but more or less it’s true.”35 That such people can gain status in the scene by violating some of its most cherished principles (inclusiveness, unity, collective identity) offends those who consider themselves to be true champions of the punk community. Though these essayists’ decrying of elitism is itself, somewhat ironically, an act of exclusion, perhaps the difference lies in what is being excluded: destructive values and attitudes destroy the scene and should be curbed, while people of all types should be welcomed with open arms. However, as the next section of anecdotes illustrate, the idea that all people should feel welcome in the punk community is often easier said than done. People belonging to groups that are marginalized within larger society—women, people of color, and LGBT individuals—often report that the punk scene mirrors the culture at large in its exclusionary attitudes and practices.

"Punk Rock" is boring, it’s a rip-off, and you deserve better.

Figure 7. Food for Thought. Matt Wobensmith, “What’s Wrong with Punk Rock?” Outpunk no. 5 (1996): 30.

Figure 7 shows a breakout box in an essay titled “What’s Wrong with Punk Rock?” by Matt Wobensmith in the queer punk zine Outpunk. He argues that in spite of punk’s insistence that it offers a space to resist traditional, oppressive values, “[i]t’s basically the same old shit with a different haircut” and that anyone seeking anything radical or progressive was lured to punk rock under false pretenses. “We were lured by the promise of something new, different, and real. Now we’re all part of a micro-society that does all of our thinking for us.”36
Punk rock as a genre often invokes a certain type of playful offensiveness in order to shock and disrupt the status quo. To many people who feel excluded from the punk scene, there is a certain danger in embracing ethnic or gender and sexuality-based humor in lyrics or casual conversation. Because there is no guarantee that anyone gleefully being offensive is doing so to deconstruct stereotypes (rather than to uphold them), several essayists report not feeling welcome in the scene and not feeling safe criticizing such speech. “To even react against the content of this failed humor is seen as being devoid of humor, as a fascist ‘pc’ killjoy. Forget the fact that you’re being called a fag, or that because you’re an Asian female your eyes look like pussy … You are now the asshole for being offended, and now the original perpetrator is suddenly the victim.”

It is worth examining this point about assumed victimhood by certain members of the scene. In a scene whose life depends simultaneously on discourses of inclusion (all being welcomed) and exclusion (exclusion from the status quo and exclusion from both elitists and posers, whom I will discuss in a later section), it is not surprising that many people who embrace punk values feel marginalized or excluded from the world in some way. Less surprising still is that those whose marginalization is not by choice might find such universal claims of punk marginalization distasteful. Outpunk quotes Mimi Nguyen in a flyer advertising a zine about people of color in punk: “‘We’re told that punk is a community ‘beyond ethnicity because ‘we’re all marginalized the same,’ even though you’re the one who gets called ‘china doll’ or ‘spic’ when you’re walking through their neighborhoods.’” Setting oneself apart from the crowd via a hyper-visual punk identity is perhaps less desirable to those whose gender, sexuality, or ethnicity already makes them stand out. The fact that punk as a visual identity can be hidden from others
when it is convenient reminds these writers that the scene is not free of the trappings of privilege that can be found within the culture at large.

Essayists exploring issues of identity use zines as a tool for reaching out to others—creating a positive, inclusionist environment even as they speak of a desire to exclude certain attitudes and practices from the scene. Ultimately, the zines are meant to provoke thought and discussion about identity and the scene. For example, a zine called Mazeltov Cocktail featured a number of columns from Jewish punks on subjects ranging from uncool bar mitzvah memories to prejudice in the punk scene. A columnist named Silva reflects on her years in the Los Angeles punk scene and recounts her own personal run-ins with white supremacist skinheads.38

Describing an evening spent hanging out on Melrose Ave talking to a skinhead, Silva writes

He had no idea I was Jewish, thought I was cute and started giving me the party line about Jews and the Zionist conspiracy, etc., etc. All with this big smile on his face. I let him go on and then asked “and if you had the power, what would you do with Jews right now?” He smiled and said ‘put them in gas chambers.’ I paused. Looked up. ‘I’m a Jew. Would you do it to me? He was dumbfounded. Everyone stopped talking and stared. He stuttered… ‘ahh, no, ahh… you’re different.’ He was confused.”39

She adds that later she heard that the guy in question had renounced his racist beliefs after a stint in jail. “Liked to think I set him on the right path….,” she concludes.

Those who seem to be the most bitter about the failure of their scenes to be inclusive are those who were truly invested in the idea that punk rock would offer a politically and socially progressive model for a music scene. Carissa writes in Dogprint, “Punk gives us hope because it creates strong connections among people throughout the world. Punks seem to want to experiment with different belief systems through the medium of their approach to lifestyle
politics. However, on closer inspection, the punk scene is nothing more than petty bourgeoisie."40 Regardless of the reasons for the exclusion, these essayists tend to believe in an inclusive scene ideal with no infighting, no elitism, and no alienation. Erik Gamlem writes:

“Our community, our scene, our vision was supposed to be all one in the same. We were supposed to have the same struggle. Now we’re just fighting against each other. Well I am leaving the union. I want no part of this stupid on going civil war inside this community. We’re fighting for a claim of ‘I was here first’ when none of us were there at all.”41

Ain’t Gonna Give a Dime to Some Sleazy Club Promoter: Community Building versus Scene Exploitation

The kids in the New Jersey punk scene are generally nice kids with good intentions, claims Keith Slader in Uprising! However, when they show up at punk shows only to sit around and talk to their friends, he gets the feeling “that punk shows in NJ, have turned into nothing more then a punk rock alternative to hanging out at the local mall, or movie theater. It just doesn’t seem that these kids really care about the music or even realize the hard work, and heart that MOST of these bands put into what they do.”42 A column in F.O.E. echoes this sentiment:

“[F]or kids today it’s like hanging out at the mall. Whatever.’ … You want to hang out? Go to a fucking diner after the show.”43 Most of the columnists who contribute to zines (and zine editors) consider their work to be part of a good-faith effort to construct and maintain the punk community. When others take advantage of their efforts and participate in the scene only casually, it can lead to frustration among the heavily invested scene members. Why work so hard to share the scene with those who reap its benefits without any of the attendant sacrifices? Though anecdotes about unappreciative teens lazing around show venues reveal an understandable, exasperated incredulity among dedicated scenesters, other scenarios (scene
violence, theft, and financial disputes) speak to a more serious concern: scene exploitation that is
driven by selfish attitudes seen by scene members as the antithesis of punk values.

Several writers express frustration that the same chaos and unpredictability that makes
punk music a vehicle for artistic expression also attract people with destructive intentions. Scene
violence—typically precipitated by a small group of outsiders who occasionally show up at gigs
to raise hell and spill blood—is a concern touched on by several essayists and mentioned
frequently in letters columns found in the sample. Paul from So-Cal band Kung-Fu Chicken
relates a typical story about a last-minute band substitution that caused a show to turn ugly:

These guys brought all their friends which were comprised of all the peckerwoods and
skinheads that I had seen beating people up at all the shows for the past ten years. True to
form they picked some poor guy at random as far as I can tell and proceeded to beat him.
Some people tried to break up the fight, and they were beat too. In the span of about 30
seconds the club was a swirling melee of fists and flying beer bottles.44

He goes on to apologize for the night and express regret that the threat of physical violence made
everyone at the show unable to react or contain the aggressive contingent.

It is often made clear in these writings that those who choose to come to shows and
behave recklessly are outsiders taking advantage of the scene, not true members of the
community. An essay in Massachusetts zine Killer Children insists that the increased frequency
of violent outbreaks at recent gigs have nothing to do with real new wave scene but people who
invade the shows. “Most participants at local gigs don’t like to beat up on other people or be
beaten up on by others, they go to gigs to hear / create music and to have a good time …
Unfortunately, the few who can’t control their aggression creates harmful repercussions for
everyone else.”45 The retrogressive values displayed in show fights (violent male aggression, the
physically strong taking advantage of the physically weak) create an undesirable environment for the punk scene. An essayist from Vancouver, British Columbia asks, “Do we want a scene (not to mention a city) plagued by senseless violence, or do we want to create an atmosphere where all people who just want to come to gigs and have fun without hurting anyone else are welcome?” When those with violent intentions take advantage of the scene’s performative environment (a space where participants can physically enact the noise and joyful chaos found in the music), the freedom so valued in punk rock is compromised. Their aggression inhibits everyone else’s ability to participate in scene activities.

Figure 8. Words to live by. “It’s Ok Not to Be a Dick!” Retrogression no. 12 [1996?]: n.p.

Theft is another source of consternation among scene members. Those who write about instances of theft view it as a violation of trust and a real deterrent to collaboration among punks—and, moreover, as a sign of general dickishness (See Figure 8). Writers often express incredulity that people in their scenes would even be interested in stealing the humble possessions of other punks. An essayist identified only as “The Old Man” recalls a show where a local promoter “caught a guy trying to snatch a 7” or two, while I was busy yapping with a
friend. I come to learn afterwards that this guy was in a band. A fucking punk rock band! Well, I was somewhat dismayed. I mean, punks don’t rip off other punks. It just isn’t done.”

An *Under 18* essay titled “Punks Don’t Steal from Punks” also touches on the theme of trust among punk scene members. The writer, a member of a band called Armistice, had her or his bass stolen at a show. “[W]hat do you do when a fellow punk takes / steals from you is that trust still there? … I used to trust a lot of people, but now I’m not sure if I can lend someone a piece of equipment with out constantly watching them—ya know? … it’s not like Mommy & Daddy will easily replace or help me w/$$$ like some people. It’s only me.”

For many of the writers, cynicism and disillusionment are common enough in the punk scene (disillusionment with society as a whole, with schools, with families), but having their trust violated by other members of the punk scene leads to massive disappointment. Such accounts are often followed by a call to exclusion to keep these destructive influences out of the community. Kate I. Rate describes a zine benefit show where her backpack was stolen. The fact that the well-hidden backpack contained only a few CDs and zine articles on a computer disk made the pettiness of the theft even more baffling to her and “led [her] to an entirely new level of cynicism in the concepts of unity, friendship, respect, and trust.” She continues, “This is me calling out all the true punks, hardcore kids, and anyone else out there with some sort of virtue to band together and exclude the ones that stifle the only chances our scenes have to grow!!! … Kids reading this … DO NOT STEAL SHIT FROM SHOWS!!!!!”

Of course, scene exploitation does not always occur internally: frequently, members of the punk scene who actively try to build the community through organizing shows are required to deal with venue owners with less-than-honorable business practices. A typical conflict includes venue owners’ reneging on agreed-upon rental price or arbitrarily raising the price.
Henry Hate describes a punk show organized by a friend at a local fire hall with a substantial turnout of over 200 paying customers. In spite of the great turnout and performances from the bands, the entire experience was soured by dishonesty and intimidation from the hall owners.

The agreed upon cost of the hall was mysteriously raised by nearly $200 when the owners saw how many people showed up. Several drunken ‘club members’ surrounded Gil in the office, like some generic mob movie and demanded he pay them the extra $200. Which leads me to wonder how they treat the winners on Bingo night. “Hey old lady, there is a twenty percent winners fee to help pay for my beer tab.”

These cautionary tales, then, serve multiple purposes. Of course, the cathartic benefits of a good-natured rant is unquestionable. The practical benefits, too, are fairly obvious; these tales warn others in the scene about potential problems that they might encounter when promoting scene activities. Finally, these tales serve an ideological purpose: they establish boundaries between the scene and the uncaring world outside and strengthen bonds among scene members.

Scene exploitation is not limited to the realm of live shows. While many articles in the sample speak of corporate exploitation of punk style—with insults frequently being lobbed at MTV, major record labels, and major magazines—the occasional tale of local style-based scene exploitation crops up as well. Austin, Texas zine *Humbug Volunteer* relates a story about a personal feud between an unscrupulous clothing store owner and two well-meaning punk kids. When a punk clothing store specializing in overpriced secondhand goods and cheap silkscreen prints opened in their suburb, the local punk scene became divided. The columnist’s unnamed friend was ostracized from the more fashion-conscious contingent of the scene when he complained to his friends about the new punk store’s high prices and shoddy merchandise. His comments that the community was being exploited by the store owner led to a feud with the store
owner that culminated in physical harassment by the owner’s friends. The young man was verbally harassed in a record store and then followed home, being attacked with—of all things—loaves of bread. The writer insists, “We are serious. After this episode, they told our friend ‘We still have 3 food groups to go.’ Again, we are serious.” The scene is still fragmented and still suffering, according to the author. Neither person lives there anymore, “but these kids that are growing up in this town are getting a bastardized version of punk rock by a few power hungry rip-off artists. And yes, Adreon, this is about you, you slimy fuck….”

An essay in Retrogression describes a disastrous all-ages show at a coffeehouse that resulted in theft and property destruction. The writer reminds readers that venues often stop hosting punk shows precisely because of those kinds of activities and urges people to intervene when they see people doing destructive things at shows. “Let them know that they are not a part of our scene… Punk is about helping to build something, to be a part of something, something OURS, not given to us by the schools, the churches, the youth groups, the government centers, something that we make and we define and we control.” What is at stake in these essays is nothing less than the scene itself. Scenes require vigilance against dodgy outsiders and the untrustworthy few who seek to take advantage of the good will and efforts of the community minded many.

**Little Grubby Sid Vicious Wannabes: Substance versus Style**

According to Phat Rob, you can always tell what a band is going to sound like before they start playing because of visual clues the band gives. If everyone in the band has their backs to the audience, then the music will have quiet interludes followed by moments of shredding intensity. He provides more helpful shorthand: “Mean looking bands with every member sportin’ a black t-shirt = Rrrraarrghhhh! Bands that look like they just got outta track and field practice
= ‘Ahhhhhh yeeaaahhhh, mutha fuckaaaaaa!!!’ (Chugga –Chugga…)” before proclaiming his hope that someday the system of visual style and musical expectations will implode. “One o’ these days I’m going to a show where a bunch o’ dudes in punk tutus take the stage and fuckin level the audience with a bazillion-mile-an-hour song about carnivorous ducks! Fuck yeah!”

The idea that visual style markers are meaningful in punk scenes was a significant part of Dick Hebdige’s work and has remained relevant to scene scholars and scene members alike. In particular, dress styles serve as semiotic shorthand for a scene member’s involvement with the punk community and, typically, her or his dedication to punk values. So what about those involved with the punk community who rely on widely accepted semiotic markers of punkhood—band shirts and patches, mohawks, Doc Martens, et cetera—to convey their punk-ness? This sample of essays and columns relates dozens of conflicts between trendy visual styles and substantive punk values. Here, I will discuss the writers’ disdain for people who embrace visual markers of punk style (whether fashion, musical elements, language, or general behavior) without embracing the values or scene-building activities that add substance to such an aesthetic.

To these writers, part of the frustration of having the punk scene invaded by “posers” or “wannabe punks” is that their widespread acceptance might imply that any approximation of a punk fashion sense is all that is required to get involved with the scene. The teenage editor of *Infectious* zine writes about her struggle with disliking the sudden popularity of punk and alternative music in her high school. She acknowledges that she is no better than anyone else and should be happy that other kids are enjoying punk music, yet she is still upset by seeing her scene lamely represented in the school’s yearbook. She explains that a yearbook cartoon depicts students at the school engaged in different activities—including a little cartoon guy, complete with green cartoon mohawk, proclaiming his love for moshing. “Is there really any solution?”
she wonders. “Am I just being selfish or stupid? I guess it’s just that music is all I have really.” In so many words, it is vaguely depressing to see something so meaningful to her reduced to a haircut in a stupid cartoon. She asks, “How can you tell who is sincerely trying to get into punk and understand it? Or who is just in it because it’s cool now?”

Of course, acts that zine contributors perceive as a valuation of style over substance come from deep within the scene just as often as they come from those who are outside the scene. Writers express frustration with bands and audiences alike when their behavior seems to encourage only shallow engagement with alternative music scenes. An essay in Holy Shit fanzine asks, “And why do bands like Eighteen Visions and the Juliana Theory seem more concerned with their tight-ass jeans and perfect haircuts than the kids who come to see them play? Why is an aesthetic valued more than having something to say?”

![Figure 9. The Juliana Theory, their tight-ass jeans, and their perfect haircuts. Sony Music, Promotional Photo, 2003.](image)

The zine editor goes on to explain that both bands that he just mentioned rock—and no doubt, rocking out is important and fun – “but it seems that substance has been replaced by image. And why do people roll their eyes and breathe a disgusted sigh when bands take a few minutes to explain what their songs are about? Isn’t having something of value to say what separates punk from mainstream music?” These writers equate excessive concern about visual aesthetics with
misplaced priorities by bands and audiences. Those who appear to emphasize the stylistic elements of the scene over the values espoused by scene members seem hollow and insincere to certain members of the punk community.

In some cases, scene members who adopt semiotic markers of punkdom in an insincere or manner become laughable. To John Greak, there is a certain amount of inauthenticity to the middle-class American punk—but this inauthenticity becomes unbearable only when it seems like the middle-class punk is taking himself way too seriously. “You know, I was thinking the other day about what drives kids from American suburbs to adopt cockney accents and start singing about tearing down the government,” he writes. He describes a show he attended to see Anti-Flag and derides their feeble attempt to look like angry youth singing about government conspiracies. “The chance of revolution never looked so dim,” he groans. “All young punks take note: it’s important to act like you believe it when singing about destroying the status quo. Oh, and winking at your girlfriend while screaming ‘Fuck the U.S.’ doesn’t make you look all that sincere.”

Part of the reason that many are attracted to the punk community in the first place is that it is supposed to provide a space to mock snobbery and deconstruct elitism. Many zine contributors are exasperated when they see those who embrace the scene superficially become rewarded with a measure of stature in the community. An essay in long-running Seattle zine *10 Things Jesus Wants You to Know* offers these helpful hints for getting your band popular in Seattle: “Write songs about taking political action even though your main pastimes include eating Taco Bell and drinking cheap beers, wear all black, taper your pant legs, become skinny and wear heavy eye make-up so everyone thinks your a junky, wear sunglasses and ignore people you know, especially if they are not in a band.” Not even the punk scene is immune to
the machinations of an unexamined scene hierarchy. Fortunately for this community, these zines
demonstrate that there is never a shortage of opinionated members who will not hesitate to call
you out on your bullshit when you get too big for your tapered-leg britches.

Ultimately, the stylistic trappings of a scene do not remain. If one’s involvement in the
punk community is limited to aping a dress style, then that involvement will yield fewer and
fewer returns as a member ages within a scene. Twenty-seven-year-old Adrian writes that the
elder statesmen of the community who cling to wearing punk clothes, screaming the lyrics, and
hanging out on the curb after a show to name-drop are the ones in the scene who have not
matured. He observes: “It’s the person that uses his punk past to evolve that truly ages
gracefully, not the person that dwells on his glorious past impressing kids 10 years his junior
with how many times he saw Youth of Today.” Scenes disband; people grow up. They may
love or contribute to new punk scenes for years, or they may work for the man and contribute to
401(K)s. True punks carry the scene’s values with them in the form of community-building
activities or political consciousness… true punks cannot literally wear their hearts on their
sleeves.

Conclusion: The Local, the Translocal, and the Offense

In many ways, the common themes that I have discussed in these fanzines (apathy versus
activity, inclusiveness versus fragmentation, community building versus scene exploitation,
substance versus style) exist only as a function of the archive. In other words, the physical
collection of these materials together implies a certain similarity, a certain frame already
imposed on the materials—and one might argue that observing connections among such different
scenes amounts to little more than wishful thinking on the part of the researcher. Certainly, the
fanzines presented in this chapter represent different localities, at different times, written by
different people who have different perspectives on their respective scenes. I would not be exaggerating if I said that, given those factors, there are potentially an infinite number of scene manifestations in punk fanzines. The DeLand, Florida scene might not look the same in 1996 as in 1995 as in 1994; it might look different through different eyes, and it might not look the same as the Pinole, California scene at that time. In spite of these differences, it is significant that many of the same problems and concerns about the scene reveal themselves in multiple places in these zines. By existing in the pages of these zines, these scenes speak to one another. Zines perform scene identity in the absence or disappearance of the scene’s embodied practices, and they are partially constitutive of the scene. Their production, distribution, and consumption create a fascinating interaction between the archive and the repertoire— their existence testifies to the importance of the embodied practices of scene-building. I will conclude this chapter by reflecting on these issues in the pages of long-lived Columbus zine the Offense.

The *Offense* began as a thick fanzine put out by Tim Anstaett (whose pen name was TKA throughout the run of the publication) starting in April 1980. From early in its run, the zine sought and published contributions from many writers—scene reports, record reviews, show reviews. As TKA’s own activities within the scene grew (he spent much of the ‘80s booking shows in Columbus), the zine changed as well. Reborn as the *Offense Newsletter* in 1982, the zine became shorter and published generally more frequently than the original *Offense* until its last issue in 1989. Over the long run of the publication, the contribution model remained the same—primarily scene reports, show reviews, recording reviews—with an emphasis on the often memorable letters to the editor.60

The letters pages were a distinctive part of the zine. Arranged neatly in a main body column and meticulously typed, most letters were followed by a handwritten reply from TKA.
Topics ranged from scene reports to hate mail to stream-of-consciousness ramblings from contributors. Replies were often deadpan, sometimes very earnest. My interest in the *Offense*’s letters to the editor is the way they represent both local and translocal scenes.

Because few zines can lay claim to the same kind of long-term scene maintenance that the *Offense* can, it is appropriate to look to the *Offense* for an idea of how translocal scenes are formed. It is, of course, a local zine—focused on the happenings of the Columbus scene. But rather than exclude those who are not affiliated with the Columbus scene, the *Offense* letters to the editor work to include readers through shared ideology and shared experiences. The zine transcends the local through the workings of scene inclusion and exclusion in its pages.

One prominent example of inclusion through shared ideology comes in the form of TKA’s sarcastic inclusion of junk mail from major media outlets in the letters section.

Figure 10.

![Letter to the Editor](image)

Figure 10. Subscribe to *Goldmine!* Letters to the Editor, *Offense Newsletter* no. 73 (1987): 1.

Figure 10 shows a typical promotional letter— in this case, from records and collectibles magazine *Goldmine*—along with the editor’s response. A generic letter encouraging advertising in *TeenAge* magazine promises that its readers are “teenagers on the FAST TRACK… We have them… and you can reach them only in *TeenAge.*” TKA responds, “Everything you say is true, Barbara, and I’m just so proud to be one of the many who can say, ‘Yer damn right I advertise in *TeenAge!*’” \(^{61}\) The inclusion of such letters serves to exclude certain values from the scene as it is created in the pages of the zine. Readers can enjoy the good-natured ribbing of mainstream media producers and their transparent, embarrassing enthusiasm for commerce.
The boundaries between local and translocal are also blurred by the shared commiseration and shared joys of scene participants in the letters page. Letter writers typically share common details—what records they bought recently, what kinds of shows have been happening around their towns, and what they thought of a particular review or item in the newsletter. Not surprisingly, a lot of people express tongue-in-cheek frustration at their home scenes. One letter from Columbus describes his life in the scene, living “close to one of campus’ dreariest barf pits.”62 He might as well have been describing Wisconsin, according to frequent contributor Paul Swinford. “Thanks for the long hours you put in on the Offense, but is it worth it?” he asks. “I’m still trying to find Nick Cave’s LP here in Milwaukee. Face it, this place is fingers down the ole throat.”63

But the ONL had a softer side, as well. The creation of a translocal scene was not accomplished simply through publishing bitchy letters from isolated individuals complaining about scenes around the world. As I have tried to show throughout this chapter, there was a true sense of camaraderie and care in the pages of this and other zines. People felt invested enough in the scene to share personal information; for example, two letters in ONL number 50 announced the birth of a subscriber’s baby. The subscriber himself wrote in to announce, “Hooray, my wife gave birth to a 10-lb. little (?) girl. Born a skinhead, but you never know with the youth these days.”64

What is so interesting about the Offense and the other zines in this sample is that they simultaneously convey a certain historicity and a certain timelessness. Observing the patterns of community building in the pages of these zines, I believe the reader witnesses a phenomenon wherein specific scene performances come to represent more than what is described in their pages. Most of these scenes are now gone; they have either morphed into a different iteration of
the same scene or disappeared. In the pages of these zines, however, they achieve a kind of permanence—not because the archive promises or can achieve permanence (it most definitely cannot), but because the meaningful patterns of scene inclusion speak to a sense of community that is familiar to nearly everyone.

Figure 11. One big, happy family. “Letters to the Editor,” *Offense* no. 4 [1980]: 5.

Figure 11 shows a letter from a young *Offense* contributor who identifies himself to the editor as “the kid that did the flyers and gave them to you at the Bank.” In the letter, he explains that he wants to go by a pseudonym (Bill Bored) so he does not have to feel self-conscious by being identified. He claims not to be terribly proud of his writing, but writes that at least it gave him something to do. In the editor’s response, TKA heartily thanks the reader for his contributions. “Thanks for caring enough to do them,” he writes. “You’re part of a big family now, you know that?”

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1 Dave Disorder, “What Was I Sniffin’?,” *A.D.D. Attention Deficit Disorder*, no. 3 (Fall 1997): n.p. As a general rule, I have retained the original spelling and punctuation of the primary sources. I have opted not to use “[sic]” to designate typos, as I feel it is distracting and unnecessary.


3 Duncombe, 6.

As of this writing, there has been no definitive 2000s-era study of the general phenomena of blogging and e-zines and their relationship to print zine circulation. However, this topic has been touched on in two recent studies—one of feminist zines, and one of sports zines. See Elke Zobl, “Cultural Production, Transnational Networking, and Critical Reflection in Feminist Zines,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 1 (2009): 3-4. See also Peter Millward, “The Rebirth of the Football Fanzine: Using E-Zines as Data Source,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 32, no. 3 (2008): 302-303.

The most notable critique of Hebdige’s discussion of the active punk community came from Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, who pointed out Hebdige’s gender bias in his articulation of subculture. According to McRobbie and Garber, when adolescent girls participate in youth cultures, they are more likely to form friendship networks whose activities take place away from public view. There are real, physical dangers that exist for young girls on public city streets; girls, then, are less likely to participate or be visible in the spectacular, ultra-public youth subcultures described by Hebdige. See Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, “Girls and Subcultures,” in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 1983), 209-222.


After reading the entire sample, I decided to weed out less useful or relevant columns on the following criteria: I wanted descriptions of local scenes more than nationally known punk acts; I wanted columns based on personal
experience rather than abstract observations; I wanted primarily punk and hardcore columns and not ska or other
genres. The smaller sample was much more manageable yet still representative of the holdings as a whole.


25 Ibid.


31 The Last Record Store, “The Last Record Store: Powered by Chuck Taylors for 25 Years and Counting,” The Last
January 17, 2010).


34 irWIN, “Insert Clever Opening Page Title Here________,” All the Answers no. 2 [1995?]: n.p.

35 “Irwin,” Big Bang Fanzine no. 1 [1996?]: n.p. It might be possible that this Irwin is the same person as irWIN in
footnote 34, but I’m not sure if that’s so. There was contact info in this column that didn’t match irWIN’s info at All
the Answers, so I’m inclined to think that this wasn’t the same person.


37 Ibid., 31.

38 The term “skinhead” has multiple meanings in the punk scene. Though skinhead style was appropriated by an
extreme right-wing faction in the late 1970s, later years saw an attempt to reclaim the term “skinhead” with the
founding of S.H.A.R.P. (Skinheads against Racial Prejudice) in 1986. In these essays, most writers are careful to
identify the type of skinhead in question. For more information on the rise of skinhead culture in punk scenes, see
Timothy S. Brown, “Subculture, Pop Music, and Politics: Skinheads and ‘Nazi Rock’ in England and Germany,”


56 Ibid.


CHAPTER IV: HOW TO BEHAVE FOR YOUR FAVE RAVE:

POLICING FAN BEHAVIOR IN TEEN-ORIENTED ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Dozens of imprints indicate that certain music biographies are intended for teenage and pre-teen music fans. In the ML/SRA closed stacks, teen-oriented music biographies are clearly marked and easily identified: from the jagged POINT by Scholastic logo resembling an EKG printout to the Bantam Starfire logo dashed across four thin lines reminiscent of a music staff, publishers placed their marks on books about artists such as David Cassidy, Debbie Gibson, and ‘N Sync. The teen-oriented biographies in the collection span six decades (from the 1950s to the first decade of the 2000s). The majority of them document the teen idols of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some of these companies still exist (Cherry Lane or Omnibus, for example). Others have faded into weird obscurity like Celeb Publishing Inc., whose Boy George’s Secret World book hints at the mercenary motivations of publishers in its front-matter “Questionaire.” Queries about the readers’ favorite things about Culture Club are interspersed with thinly disguised attempts to sell more books: “Will you tell your friends about the Secret World series? What other entertainers would you like to see in the Secret World books?”

The books also bear the marks of their lives prior to their existence in the closed stacks of the university’s music library. A few still have the former owners’ names printed in smudgy marker on the front covers. More than a few still have empty card pockets and cancellation stamps visible from a local library that decided to scrap biographies on Cyndi Lauper and Van Halen to free up shelf space after years of declining circulation. Several have mysterious marginalia—like the Madonna biography with some passages underlined in pencil with no apparent logic, including a spindly handful of bowed, awkward lines printed beneath the phrase “fashion tastes.”
The physical bodies of these texts act as vehicles for communicating each book’s particular history—perhaps once scrutinized for purchase based on library budgets, perhaps plucked from shelves and mocked by patrons, perhaps lovingly cradled and enthusiastically thumbed through by young music fans—and that is only their exterior, tangible history. Inside the books is a whole other story. As technologies of representation, these books constitute performances of both celebrity and audience identity. Whether the book is a 1964 pulp paperback that speculates about the Beatles’ girlfriends or a 2000-era glossy fact book about the Backstreet Boys, the function is the same. Just as the bodies of the books themselves have our culture’s stories written upon them, so too is culture written upon the bodies of the assumed audience of these books (female teenage pop music fanatics). As I will discuss, the pages of these biographies and similar offerings from the teen-oriented pulp press both perform and create performances of teenage femininity and fandom.

In this chapter, I argue that fan behavior is policed in insidious ways through these eye-catching, visually appealing technologies: teen-oriented artist biographies often prescribe certain “desirable” fan behaviors and identities or chide the fans for behavior that is considered unruly or outside the bounds of hegemonic femininity. I will discuss these biographies within a feminist Foucauldian framework of power and discipline, offer a brief genealogy of the gendering of teen fan identity and address in the academy and in the popular press, and address major themes in these biographies. Finally, I will re-examine these books with a greater acknowledgement of fan agency and self-made identity through the concept of technologies of the self.

**Power, Disciplinary Practices, and Feminist Concerns**

The conceptual line between a hot pink paperback about Mötley Crüe and Michel Foucault’s genealogy of power may not seem instantly apparent. However, as I read dozens of
these bios, one common theme emerged. No matter what year, no matter what iteration of teen idol was represented, the function of the books seemed the same. They seemed to function as guidebooks for (female) fans—to tell fans of a certain star what was expected of them as a fan. Fans should not hound a celebrity for autographs, for example. Fans should keep a polite distance. They should dress a certain way, act a certain way, be a certain way. The role of the fan outlined in these books is thus not very different from the hundreds of “shoulds” and “should nots” suggested to adolescent females every day through magazines, television, and film.

To understand the role of teen-oriented rock and pop biographies as one of the myriad cultural institutions that shape female bodies and identities, it is necessary to briefly discuss Foucault’s analysis of power and the work of feminist scholars influenced by the French intellectual. In *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*, Amy Allen writes that Foucault’s genealogy of power is a helpful analytical tool for feminists. First, Foucault’s focus on power in its “capillary” form of existence is similar to feminist scholars’ insistence on the importance of studying individual women’s narratives (embodied in the Second Wave feminist slogan “The personal is the political.”) Second, Foucault’s account of the shaping of the body through everyday disciplinary practices is particularly applicable to the lives of women.

Of course, Foucault did not observe the unique effects of disciplinary power on women’s bodies. The task of describing this feminine embodiment has been left up to feminist scholars who have been intrigued by Foucault's genealogy of power and seek to apply his ideas to women’s lives. Self-surveillance and self-policing are key components of disciplinary power in women’s lives. Sandra Bartky points out that women are encouraged to police their bodies in ways that men are not: women undergo frequent diet and exercise regimens; they come of age in
a culture that encourages girls to constrain their physical movements; the female body is adorned and ornamented with hairstyles, makeup, jewelry, and fashion. Bartky compares the self-policing of feminine appearances with Foucault’s prisoners of the Panopticon who learn to police their own behavior and thus become the source of their own subjection:

The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle, or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become … a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy.

Just as women are subtly encouraged by a number of institutions to monitor their appearance and behavior, I argue that the subtle prodding of fan behavior employed by these bios constitutes another ideological mechanism (among hundreds of others in the media, communities, and other local institutions such as schools) for encouraging young females to police themselves.

Indeed, the discourse of the obsessed teen music fan is more than simply a marketing tool or representational strategy in these biographies; rather, this discourse is partially responsible for the creation of this particular subject-position. As a mechanism of power that partially produces the teenage popular music fan, the discourse of teenage fandom is worthy of critical scrutiny.

Janet Ransom summarizes Foucault’s somewhat inchoate articulation of discourse simply as “the structured ways of knowing which are both produced in, and the shapers of, culture. Discourses are not merely linguistic phenomena, but are always shot through with power and are institutionalized as practices.” Analyzing discourses is the task of the critical genealogy, Foucault’s method for accounting for the creation of subjects within a historical framework. He describes genealogy as “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges,
discourses, domains of object etc.” that assumes a historically constituted subject, not an unchanging subject. In the next section, I will offer a genealogy of the (female) teen audience in the context of teen-oriented artist biographies. The equation of “female” with “consumer” and the subsequent devaluation of feminine tastes poises the music bio to speak from a position of authority to its female readers and thus to encourage a certain biddable performance of female fandom.

Mrs. Consumer to Seventeen to 16: The Gendering of the Teen Music Audience

The casual intimacy established in the pages of teen-oriented artist biographies and their ultimately prescriptive tone can be traced directly to the style of address popularized by 16 Magazine in the late 1950s. This sense of intimacy—developed by asking personal, fan-generated questions of teen heartthrobs and adopting a sympathetic tone when describing the trials and tribulations of celebrity—is fabricated to encourage readers to trust the publication and the idols it creates. However, this trust is fraught with problems: teenage address strategies in these publications create not only well-mannered consumers, but also self-policing young women. At this point, it is helpful to examine the context of the emergence of the teen-centered press. I locate these materials at the intersection of two early-to-mid-twentieth-century discourses: the female consumer and the teenager.

Historically, acts of consumption typically have been gendered female. However, it was within the development of early twentieth-century consumer society in the United States that ideas about female facility with shopping and spending began to be accepted as conventional wisdom. Women’s assumed affinity for shopping was tied to their roles as protectors of the purity of hearth and home, and the purchase of consumer goods was merely another way to ensure their families’ happiness at home. This ideal, while perfectly at home in the world of early
twenty-first-century consumer culture, was actually forged in the Victorian-era division of public and private spheres. Middle-class Victorians saw the private domain of the home as a refuge from the public sphere’s hardships, and women were idealized as the loving and gentle keepers of this space.\textsuperscript{11}

As Victorian romanticism gave way to the Industrial era’s emphasis on efficiency, this virtuous perception of womanhood gradually shifted to an endorsement of the more practical role of women as household managers. Many kings of industry were eager to pander to the newly christened Mrs. Consumer in order to sell their products. In the 1929 book \textit{Selling Mrs. Consumer}, home economics expert Christine Frederick claims that women—bless their hearts!—were able to become shrewd home managers despite not being the logical creatures that men are.\textsuperscript{12} According to Frederick, women get their main satisfaction in life from the objects and people around them. “Doubtless this is why Mrs. Consumer is the heart and center of the merchandising world, the great family purchasing agent, who spends most of the money men earn and who is deeply concerned with all the details of ten thousand little items of merchandise, which can be more thrilling to her than men usually realize.”\textsuperscript{13} Frederick, citing a percentage circulated by advertisers, estimates that women were responsible for 80 to 90\% of a family’s purchases.\textsuperscript{14} The shrewd adviser, she writes, should know how to sell to women.

This 80-to-90\% figure may have demonstrated that women’s roles as consumers were vital to the enterprise of producing and marketing goods, but it was no guarantee that female consumers would be respected or their opinions valued. By the 1920s, advertising relied not only on the general assumption that women were responsible for the purchase of household items but also on “the tacit assumption that women’s minds were vats of frothy pink irrationality.”\textsuperscript{15} Roland Marchand writes that early modern ad men had a great deal of contempt for the
consumers who purchased the wares they so strenuously hawked. The pages of early modern advertising trade journals consistently described consumers as “an emotional, feminized mass, characterized by mental lethargy, bad taste, and ignorance.”16 Given the assumed influence that women had on all household purchases, there is little doubt that the conflation of “women” and “consumers”—and the subsequent devaluation of the act of consumption—are reflective of a similar devaluation of women’s lives in the culture at large. It is within this discourse of feminized consumption that a similar perception of female music consumption came to be meaningful. While Mrs. Consumer was expected to purchase the items to keep her home clean and comfortable, her younger counterparts were free to consume frivolous items such as clothes, makeup, and records that helped them forge their young adult identities.

The idea that adolescence was a distinct period of life characterized by stress and trials was not uncommon in the early twentieth century. The teenager, however, was a post-World War II invention. In Teenage: the Creation of Youth Culture, Jon Savage claims that the wartime rhetoric of emancipation helped define youth culture. In the early-to-mid 1940s, proponents of nationwide Teen Canteens had sought to curb the perceived menace of juvenile delinquency by providing recreational spaces for adolescents. Adults representing the concerns of the status quo saw the younger generation as rudderless fun-seekers and were dismayed when adolescents began asserting themselves publicly.17 There was, however, one group of adults always ready to address the needs of the newly minted “teenager”: advertisers. By 1944, teens were identified primarily as a marketing demographic with well-defined desires and needs as well as ample free time and money to spend on them.18 Savage writes: “Consumerism offered the perfect counterbalance to riot and rebellion: it was the American way of harmlessly diverting youth’s disruptive energies.”19
The discourse of the teenager created consumers from the beginning of teen culture, and teen girls were particularly marked as a consumer audience. From as early as 1920, teenage girl culture emerged from a set of negotiations among producers of consumer goods and advertisers, parents and other authority figures, and the girls themselves. Their identities were negotiated partially through the purchase and use of consumer goods—particularly beauty products and fashions. Teen girls received more attention than did teen boys as consumers, and marketers sought to capitalize on the buying power of the teenage female.\(^\text{20}\)

It was in this milieu that *Seventeen* magazine was born. Debuting in September 1944 under the direction of editor Helen Valentine, *Seventeen* was an instant commercial success both with advertisers and among teen girls. The magazine’s circulation exploded to nearly 650,000 after a mere six months of publication, and its pages quickly filled with advertisements.\(^\text{21}\) The success with advertisers was largely due to the idea promoted by Valentine and *Seventeen*’s promotional editor Estelle Ellis that teen girls “come in bunches, like bananas … sell one, and the chances are you’ll sell them all.”\(^\text{22}\) However, the magazine’s success was not entirely built on packing each issue with ads; Valentine genuinely believed that teen girls needed their own magazine and worked to ensure that the contents reflected that need. *Seventeen*’s text excluded adults and male teens and addressed girls as savvy future participants in world and community affairs.\(^\text{23}\) *Seventeen*’s main focus, however, was fashion. Eager to report on the fads that swept United States high schools and to provide fashion advertisers with a clear image of teen girlhood to promote, *Seventeen* helped forge teen girl identity.\(^\text{24}\)

By the mid-twentieth century, consumer culture had marked women as its most keen participants and teenagers as another substantial group of spenders. Teenage girls, then, existing at the intersection between these two discourses, had their consumerist destinies outlined for
them from adolescence onward. If the feminized mass of consumers was assumed to be flighty and illogical, then the teen market was assumed to be particularly so. If the mass audience was assumed to have a passion for popular culture, then the teenage girl audience had a full-blown case of hysteric.

This assumption seemed to prove correct when it came to popular music. Adolescents of both genders were avid consumers of popular culture, but male and female meanings and uses were assumed to be different with music in terms of public consumption practices and fan culture. The popularity of Frank Sinatra among teenage girls in the early 1940s seemed to demonstrate this difference. Much was made in the media of the pandemonium that accompanied Sinatra’s performances: teen girls demonstrated their devotion to the singer by swooning, fainting, and crying at the mere sight or mention of the crooner. The press often dismissed their concern for Sinatra as impulses as varied as a need for a father figure to a displaced mothering instinct. The female teen audience was imagined by and large as pre-sexual: it seems that the establishment could dismiss the romantic musical obsessions of girls much more easily than they could admit that the Sinatra craze was about women’s public expression of sexual desires. Because of “Swoonatra”’s largely female fan base, the press also eagerly dismissed Sinatra and his music—a clear example of the emerging trend of devaluation of the feminine in popular music consumption.

In the years between the Sinatra craze and Beatlemania, the teenage female music fan was derided as excitable, musically ignorant, and obsessed with musicians’ boyish good looks. As “rock and roll” evolved into institutionalized rock music, having a largely female fan base was tantamount to critical suicide. By the mid-1970s, it was not uncommon for potential teen idols to actively resist the label and to refuse access to publications that served as a bridge
between the stars and the teen audience.\textsuperscript{27} Next, I will discuss the very publication that created the teen music idol as we know it; this magazine’s enthusiastic editorial tone and teenybopper readership was often regarded dismissively or even contemptuously by the (male) rock establishment.\textsuperscript{28}

The discourses of the consumption-oriented teenager, the female consumer, and the fervent music fan collided in the pages of \textit{16 Magazine}. This “magazine for girls” was the brainchild of a handful of middle-aged men who sought to expand profits after making a tidy profit from a newsstand publication devoted to Elvis.\textsuperscript{29} The magazine’s true voice, however, emerged a year later in 1958 under the guidance of secretary-turned-editor Gloria Stavers. Stavers was responsible for the features of \textit{16} that became known as teen mag staples: the personal celebrity questions culled from reader letters, an emphasis on photos and idol trivia (known as “pix” and “fax” respectively), and the personal, informal tone that addressed readers as friends. \textit{16}’s style remained consistent even after her departure in 1975.\textsuperscript{30}

The venerable \textit{16} was characterized by contradiction: while the rag and its readers were often dismissed as trite fluff by the “legitimate” press, the readers’ feelings and experiences were just as frequently idealized and romanticized by the magazine’s staff. The result—gushing, \textit{soi-disant} intimate copy punctuated by glossy pinup shots of dreamy-eyed boys—constitutes a particular performance of teen girl identity. In the pages of \textit{16} and in mainstream press descriptions of the magazine, a bizarre mix of well-meaning yet patronizing assumptions about the teenage female audience emerged. For example, longtime editor Gloria Stavers described \textit{16} as a magazine “for the girl who is too old for daddy’s knee, but too young for the boy next door.”\textsuperscript{31} A 1970 essay on Stavers in a \textit{Rolling Stone} special publication entitled \textit{Groupies and other Girls} sketches out the contours of a typical teenybopper:
They are more concerned with the crisis of when do their braces come off than they are about teasing their hair, and they have so much energy they can hardly get to sleep at night. Music matters to them, but rarely on an interpretative level. ‘Ohhh, who’s that second boy from the right, the cute one with the blond hair?’ is likely to be their comment on almost any group they see on TV. ‘I’ll just die if I don’t find out his name!’

In fact, the result of these assumptions about the female teen music audience (that they are pre-sexual and therefore not “legitimate” women, that they are musically ignorant, and that they are only superficially interested in music) was the christening of Gloria Stavers by the mainstream press as the “Mother Superior of the Inferior.”

Of course, that moniker reveals more about the culture’s general devaluation of women than it does anything about Stavers specifically. Stavers was known for her exceeding empathy for the tribulations of the typical 16 reader. “She writes more letters, she looks at more, she reads more, she receives more—everything is intense, everything is a crisis,” explains Stavers in the Rolling Stone interview. “At 12, everything is agonizing—the depths are the lowest, the heights are the highest.” Still, this intense empathy went hand in hand with an idealization of the teenybopper phase that was perhaps more patronizing than concerned. Describing the wave of concern for celebrities’ welfare in 16’s reader letters, Stavers muses, “‘There’s a great caring about others … it’s almost like ‘And a little child shall lead them.’” The interviewer rapturously continues: “At the risk of sounding sacrilegious, it enters into a kind of Christlike goodness: really good love for all creatures.”

It is in this context, situated within these discourses, that teen-oriented artist biographies come to function as an instrument of policing feminine behaviors. Many of the conventions of these biographies—particularly the prose style and emphasis on celebrity trivia—can be traced
directly to the practices of *16 Magazine* pioneered by Gloria Stavers. The readers of these books (whether or not they fit the description of the stereotypical teenybopper female) inherited all the cultural baggage that goes along with this particular performance of teen girl identity. Female consumers, teenage consumers, shallow, obsessive music fans: these discourses all combine to make these biographies fascinating cultural artifacts. Next, I will discuss the themes of prescribed fan behavior, encouraged femininity, and rebellion and sexuality commonly found in teen-oriented artist biographies. These themes each demonstrate the policing of young female fans and, by extension, the policing of women within the context of contemporary femininity.\[^{36}\]

“‘This is Bad.’”\[^{37}\]: Prescribed Fan Behaviors

A postscript to a 1984 Duran Duran biography lists the address of the band’s management company so that fans may write letters to their idols. According to the text, this address also grants access to the band’s Official Fan Club, so long as American fans remember to send the letter via Air Mail and pay the correct postage. The book promises that any letters sent care of Capitol Records will be forwarded to the band and will also let the executives know how much fan support the band has. However, “[i]t is not a good idea to try to call the members of the band, either when they are at home or while they are on tour. They simply do not have time to speak with every fan, although they wish they did.” The fact that no number is listed here or in any other publication is testimony to the ingenuity of a number of fans who evidently already located some likely-looking numbers and began calling. The book admonishes that if one were to find a phone number and attempt to call the band, “[y]ou will only succeed in annoying the guys and their staff, frustrating yourself, and running up your phone bill to ridiculous heights.”\[^{38}\]
The disdainful tone in this Duran Duran bio is not common in music publications geared toward young superfans, but it is incredibly telling. For a popular music group, making money requires as much passivity from consumers as possible. From the perspective of the massive staff that supports the pop music industry, constant distractions from fans cost valuable time and money. Sure, a handful of 11-year-old girls’ breathlessly calling a record company hoping to talk to John Taylor seems harmless enough. However, when this incident is multiplied by thousands, these fans now comprise a giggling horde that cannot be stopped and thus must be tamed—in this case, by shaming the girls into more “reasonable” behavior.

Just because teen-oriented artist biographies do not generally take the shame-based approach of the Duran Duran book quoted above does not mean that they are not policing fan behavior. A much more common strategy for policing behavior is the sympathy plea. Time and again in the pages of these biographies, teen idols are presented as sympathetic figures living perpetually at the mercy of thronging fans. The goal, of course, is to persuade fans to understand how stressful this existence is for the celebrity and eventually to become the kind of fan that keeps a respectful distance. Some bios go so far as to describe a few members of the music group in question as social butterflies who love the limelight and all its attendant scrutiny and invasion, while one or two members—the “shy” ones—are painted as sweet, wistful guys who of course love their fans but often long for the trouble-free existence they led prior to superstardom. In the several bios I encountered about early ‘90s teen supergroup New Kids on the Block, Jonathan Knight is frequently described as the “quiet one” who just needs to be alone sometimes. One bio claims that Knight was upset when “[h]e couldn’t stay at home because there were always girls with their noses pressed against the front windows … Before the fence was put up, some fans did
go too far and really upset Jon. He had planted a special tree in his front garden as a Mother’s Day gift and the girls unwittingly destroyed it in the rush to crowd round him."³⁹

The tacit message in the tale of the trampled tree was, of course, that when fans are not able to restrain themselves, they make their idols unhappy. The text draws a firm line between the good fan (the girl reading the biography who wants to know what is important to her favorite musician and who, it is assumed, will behave accordingly—the policed fan) and the bad fan (the fan who just wants to see / talk to / touch her idol and is obviously not a true fan because if she were, she would express her love in less aggressive ways.

The ¹⁶ approach to policing fans is to encourage certain behaviors while discouraging others. A 2001 article in ¹⁶ advises teenage girls not to “touch or grab! We know, we know … when you see ‘N Sync’s JC Chasez or BBMak’s Ste McNally you can’t help yourself, you just want to reach out and touch them. But don’t! Think about how you would feel if strangers kept plucking at your hair and yanking at your sweatshirt—you wouldn’t like it at all, would you?”⁴⁰ Indeed. The article goes on to offer tips on how to write the perfect fan letter and insists that celebrities appreciate gifts that come from the heart. Glitter, bright colors, and “funky heart-shaped hole punchers”⁴¹ are all great ways to gussy up a fan letter. Neatness and proper postage are a must, according to the article. Letters have the added benefit of being much less intrusive than other methods of approaching one’s favorite pop artist. Fans can pour a lot of effort into the letter and feel as though perhaps their favorite star will read and respond to the letter. Here, the letter is pitched as a good way to respect a celebrity’s privacy.

However, even fan letters can prove to be too much of a burden for teen idols. A 1972 bio describes how the fame and fortune bestowed upon young David Cassidy certainly made his life complete. However, Cassidy explains that one desire remains unfulfilled: the desire for privacy!
In *Meet David Cassidy*, it is revealed that fans’ persistence in tracking down the toothy star has forced him more than once to move to a new house. “[T]he doorbell would keep ringing. Girls at the door would overcome whatever shyness they had to ask: ‘Is this *really* where David Cassidy lives?’ ‘May we *see* him?’ ‘Would you please ask him to *autograph* this?’ ‘Could we please have his *picture*?’” 42 Rather than encouraging readers to express their love for Cassidy through the mail, the copy takes on a slightly accusatory tone. It states that in addition to being constantly besieged by fans for autographs and pictures, Cassidy “receives a small mountain of mail each week, mostly letters from girls who can’t understand why he doesn’t write back. But if David tried to answer each letter, he’d never have a moment left to act in front of a camera or to play and sing into a microphone. And if all his fans knew his address, he’d receive even more *mail.*”43

It’s a manipulative little narrative. On the one hand, fans must be pandered to to some degree; otherwise, they would not buy the merchandise or attend the concerts. On the other hand, too much adoration leads to lack of privacy for the teen idol and too many demands on (usually) his precious time. The result is to appeal to fans’ sense of decency. They can prove that they are *truly* devoted by keeping their distance out of respect for the star’s wishes. Anecdotes such as Jonathan Knight’s tree story and David Cassidy’s privacy woes also work to police fan behavior by explicitly naming a behavior that the star finds off-putting or upsetting. Some of these pieces adopt a confessional tone: the artist is “opening up” to the biographer and, by extension, to their fans. A sense of intimacy is created by implying that *some fans* go out of their way to alienate the artist, but *true fans* would never do anything to make their favorite artists uncomfortable.

Another strategy for policing fan behavior is to allow a narrative in the biography to threaten out-of-control fans with lack of access to their idols. Sensitive New Kid on the Block Jonathan Knight is once again the protagonist in this tale, which is recounted in a different
New Kids bio than was the tree saga: while the New Kids were performing at a theme park, “the audience began tossing pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters onto the stage. At first, the guys overlooked it, but when the coins nearly hit Jon’s head, he asked the crowd to stop throwing them or the band would have to end the show. When the fans didn’t stop, the guys did cut the concert short.”44 For a moment, I will put aside the issue of whether the group was justified in walking off the stage (… although it does seem that when you are part of a musical commodity created expressly for the projection of fans’ dreams and desires, you cannot complain too much when the same fans mistake you for a human wishing well). The relevant element of this story is the band’s implicit threat of leaving the stage again in the future. The fan reading the biography understands that docile behavior is expected of them at a concert or the concert could end abruptly.

As the next sections will demonstrate, expected fan behavior often becomes tightly bound with cultural expectations about femininity and feminine sexuality. The source of these expectations can be figures that the fans wish to attract (male musicians) or figures that fans are meant to identify with (female musicians).45 I will conclude this section with an example of policing fan behavior via the latter: When young Britney Spears was a novice in the music industry, she performed as an opening act for established boy band ‘N Sync and told reporters how surprised she was at the raucous behavior of the band’s female fans. Voicing disbelief at the young fans’ sexual behavior at concerts, Spears says, “I started to say, ‘Well, when I was that age I would never be like that,’ but I am that age. I would never dream of going through the stuff they go through for these guys. It’s sooo bizarre ... girls out in the audience are lifting their shirts up, and I’m dying. I’m like, ‘Oh my goodness, I’m not believing this. This is bad.’”46 In the years when Spears was identified by the press as a role model to young girls, her candid
dismay at the brazen behavior of ‘N Sync fans shames her own fans into propriety. True, female fans may not be baring their breasts during Spears’ concerts, but the manner in which the narrative presents her voice (that of a gossipy peer) extends this policing past the moment of the live show and into the bedrooms of girls who are learning how to negotiate the norms of femininity.

On the one hand, this style of address in teen-oriented artist biographies is frank and intimate. On the other hand, the intimacy created by the style of address in these biographies is fabricated and one-sided. By making readers feel as though they are privy to intimate information about their favorite musical artists, the bios then can ask the readers to do favors for their new celebrity friends. Favors asked of fans typically require the fans to behave in a certain way—to respect the privacy of the artist, to refrain from touching or grabbing, to stifle their screams and give their idols space. The offer of friendship extended from the celebrity is simply an offer to be adored from a distance.

“I’ll Look Good for Bobby”\(^{47}\): Encouraged Femininity

Among the things assumed to be true about the teen audience by these biographies is a marked difference in audience members’ perceptions of male and female artists. Male artists seem to be offered solely for the projection of heterosexual, romantic fantasies: they are the boys the reader wants to be with. Female artists, on the other hand, are the girls the reader is supposed to want to be. Typically, the reader is never invited to imagine how David Cassidy or the New Kids on the Block feel when they are on stage or what it is like to record an album. The reader is, however, invited to relate to the everyday problems of the female artist and encouraged to follow her style. This representational strategy for female artists can be traced to the pages of \textit{16 Magazine} under Gloria Stavers. Following the inquiries of fan letters, Stavers chose to promote
female artists who were relatable. For example, Stavers remarked in 1970 that no popular female artists had emerged since Cher hit the scene. “‘Our readers weren’t jealous or envious of her,’” Stavers said. “‘Instead, they felt they could talk to her—and that she would understand them.’”

Though the female artist is often celebrated for how normal and down-to-earth she is, the role of female artists in teen-oriented bios is generally that of a glamorous peer whom readers are encouraged to emulate. Here, the disciplining of female bodies again becomes relevant. Female music artists are presented as perfected, wholesome girls who provide fans a template for all-American femininity. Biographers frequently ask female artists to give fashion and makeup tips to their fans. In most cases, artists embrace very traditionally feminine styles of dress with a lot of adornment and embellishment. The stars’ favorite cosmetics, too, are frequently described in painstaking detail. The assumption in the text is that the reader will try to copy her favorite artist’s style—some bios even going so far as to include a breakout box that entreats readers to “[t]ry these techniques out for yourself!”

A 1990 bio on Debbie Gibson emphasizes the star’s normalcy in a chapter devoted to fashion and style. Gibson is painted as a typical teenager who experiences typical teenage negotiations with parents over outfit choices but still manages to rock a stylish combination of clothes and cosmetics. "When it comes to makeup, Debbie's style is bright, but not brassy, hip but not too hot. She thinks most girls look best with a light base, black mascara (it's important to bring out your eyes), and maybe some clear or neutral lip color. For special occasions or evenings, what works well for Debbie are brown shadows with a soft pink blush." Gibson’s biography is not the only one to encourage subtlety in makeup. Written decade later, a book on Christina Aguilera describes a number of different midriff-baring styles the star embraces—from “Casual Chic” to “a Night on the Town” to “Totally Christina”—and once again instructs readers
that less is more on the makeup front. “When Christina is just hanging out, preparing to spend a day at the mall, she wears her makeup in a subtle fashion. Over a lightly applied foundation, Christina wears just the slightest amount of blush for a hint of color … Here, blue mascara and just a touch of frosted eye shadow around the eyes have a sparkling daytime effect.” Cultural expectations about teen girlhood are communicated through these tips. Traditional forms of teen femininity are described as desirable and attainable, but heavy makeup is a no-no. Though the bios never state it explicitly, we can assume that heavy makeup or risqué fashions might be branded too adult for young readers. The “proper” forms of femininity are rigidly embodied by the female stars—even as the texts encourage girls to find their own unique styles.

Interestingly, both the Gibson bio and the Aguilera bio also invite readers to compare their bodies to those of the stars. The Gibson book declares that "Raisin Bran is her breakfast of choice, she knows where to get the best Sicilian pizzas in town, and she tries to spend at least an hour a day working out, but that's mostly to build stamina, not for weight control. That's not been one of slim Deb's problems." Echoes the Aguilera book: “She likes things to be snug, and with a bod like hers, no worries. Everyday loves include baby doll tees, soft cropped sweatshirts, spaghetti strap tanks, and long, side-slit skirts with funky shoes. Whatever her fashion mood, Christina’s clothes are soooo cool.” Both artists are described as not being burdened with the problem of worrying about their weight. Both are described as naturally slender and thus capable of carrying off the snazzy styles they are fond of wearing. Since the function of these passages on celebrity style is to invite the reader to relate to the star and admire or copy her style, the subtext of these statements is that weight should be considered before styling oneself. Anyone who does not have Debbie’s or Christina’s slim body perhaps should worry about their ability to
carry off a daring or stylish look. The body comparison that is invited through such statements in these bios is yet another example of the rigorous self-policing expected of young women.

The embracing of traditional femininity by fans does not just occur in female artist biographies: in biographies of male artists, the practice of describing the traits of the ideal girl or woman serves a similar body-policing function. Across the entire sample, it was rare that I encountered a biography that did not include a description (however brief) of the kind of gal favored by the artist in question. The “girl of your dreams” narrative is another example of a common teen bio authoring practice that can be traced to the All-Star Fact Sheet pioneered by *16 Magazine*.

![Figure 12. No celebrity hounds for the elder Cassidy on this All-Star Fact Sheet. In Randi Reisfeld and Danny Fields, *Who’s Your Fave Rave? 16 Magazine Teen Idols as You Knew Them... AND as They Really Were!* (New York: Berkley Trade, 1997), 130.](image)

Within the sample, I was able to locate the ideal woman narrative as early as 1964: a cheaply printed magazine-style special edition book about the women in the Beatles’ lives lists an agonizingly specific synthesis of the feminine traits admired by the Fab Four. “All the pet Beatle
birds seem to fit into certain specifications: laughing luminous eyes (of any color), slender figure, long curvy legs, medium bust, height five-three to five-six, weight about 112, age 16 to 21, straight hair flowing to the shoulder or even longer with a cute fringe on top." The message to Beatlemaniacs was, of course, that if they fancied being a pet Beatle bird, the closer they were to that ideal, the better.

The “ideal girl” narrative was certainly not relegated to the early years of teen-oriented biographies. By the late 1970s, when the heartthrob torch was passed from David Cassidy to his half-brother Shaun, biographers were quick to the draw with sympathetic descriptions of Cassidy woes and wants. The following is a description of Shaun’s ideal girl: “I guess everyone has some idea of a dream girl or guy,” he muses, his eyes misty with concentration. ‘So here’s mine: she’s warm, open, honest, and likes me a lot. She wears little or no make-up and I feel I can tell her everything.’” After declaring that he is turned on by a girl who takes care of her body and has a brain, Cassidy generously mentions that he does not care what color a girl’s hair is as long as it looks nice on her. “Of course,” he adds, “I would like a girl to dress in whatever’s appropriate for the occasion.”

A final example of the ideal girl narrative speaks to the power of gendered, heteronormative behavior expectations among both popular music fans and the artists. A typical “ideal girl” query posed to ‘N Sync member Lance Bass yields a textbook “ideal girl” response: “I like wholesome type girls—Miss Teen USA type girls!” (By the way, Lance was at the Miss Teen USA Pageant at the time he said this. He also confessed, ‘I fell in love fifty-one times today!’)” Wholesome, All-American beauty: what better response could a teen idol give for his fans, girls who likely fancied themselves typical American teenagers? This play-it-safe response from 1999 becomes particularly interesting in the context of the 2006 People Magazine cover
story wherein Bass came out and described the pressure he felt as a closeted boy bander. Throughout his time with ‘N Sync, he felt that the careers of his peers would be ruined if he did not conform to the proper image of the teen idol—fabricated narratives about All-American femininity and all.\textsuperscript{57} The Lance Bass example reminds us of the power of gendered discourses in performing both fan and artist identity.

Throughout these narratives of encouraged femininity, there is an assumption that the traits described in these books will eventually be emulated by the artists’ fans. That assumption was echoed by \textit{16} editor Gloria Stavers. To Stavers, there was beauty and world-making potential in the imitative practices of young female music fans. “In front of her, there’s a photograph of this lovely person, and she takes total charge: it’s hers…[s]he might read that he hates girls who are sloppy, so she suddenly starts paying attention to herself. She thinks, Well, I’ll look good for Bobby.”\textsuperscript{58} Certainly, the girl in question is taking control of her own subjectivation, but her body is still being policed and constrained to fit hegemonic forms of femininity. In the last section of this chapter, I will address the issues of identity construction and empowerment in such fan practices. First, however, I will discuss the themes of rebellion and sexuality in teen-oriented artist biographies.

\textbf{“Forbidden Fruit (of the Loom)”\textsuperscript{59}: Rebellion and Sexuality}

Lest we think that all female artists in teen-oriented artist biographies demonstrate the exact same template of feminine performance for readers to emulate, it is worthwhile to examine an artist who—on the surface at least—endorses a rebellious image of non-normative femininity. Enter early-aught pop sensation Avril Lavigne. A 2003 biography about Lavigne claims that music fans were tired of the sugary pop music that dominated the charts in the late 1990s. This chanteuse—a “diminutive Canadian skate-punk tomboy with attitude and anger”—is described
as the breath of fresh air that music fans wanted. “While other girls in her class were worrying about the cheerleading squad and make-up, Avril was learning to skate, hanging out with boys and watching jock sports on TV.” Quoth Avril on the topic of her rebellion: “I got suspended from school a couple of times … and I got kicked out of class – for talking and not doing my homework and throwing shit around the room or something.” As for the fans’ reactions, the bio claims “[i]t was love at first sight. The world fell for Avril Lavigne.” Naturally, wherever good-natured rock rebellion rears its head, it will take a backseat to the traditionally feminine enterprise of being adored. In this section, I argue that narratives of rebellion in these biographies ultimately reinforce discourses of desirable (traditional) femininity.

Lavigne’s talking-in-school brand of rebellion is merely a precursor to more adult forms of rebellion encouraged among fans who are assumed to be slightly older than the teenybopper crowd. As the biographies enter the realm of rock and roll (instead of pop or pop rock) and leave the realm of young-adult publishing imprints (such as Scholastic or Bantam Starfire), the intended audience of these colorful, effusive books ages a few years. In many instances, the narratives of these texts indicate a shift in perceived reader identity from the teenybopper who adores her favorite artist from a romanticized, hazy distance to the groupie who is ready, willing, and able to get raunchy with the band. Though she still may be a teenager, the older fan is addressed as a young woman ready to act out her sexual desires for the rock star or other idol. Indeed, the institution of 1970s rock journalism branded groupies as “grown-up teenyboppers.”

With this discursive shift, descriptions of rock stars in these biographies tend to eschew dreamy-eyed musings by various Cassidys in favor of lewd descriptions of manly strutting and boasting. Take, for example, this description of Van Halen singer David Lee Roth, who “exudes sex … He jumps, he thrusts, he screams, he moans, and he talks, talks, talks about girls, girls,
girls. His sexual escapades and conquests (implied) are as legendary as they are unsubstantiated … He is a walking sexual fantasy.” In several of these rock reads, (female) fan rebellion is equated with sexual rebellion—much of it lacking the good-natured sleaze of the garrulous Diamond Dave, who is celebrated in three different bios as a one-man party.

Perhaps the most disturbing narrative of sexual rebellion in the sample occurs in a 1985 Mötley Crüe biography. “[M]any Crüe fans are very young, and, it must be said, anything but innocent—probably able to teach their parents a trick or two on the carnal cavorting front,” the bio states. The text goes on to describe a contest held by San Antonio radio station KISS-FM called “What Would You Do to Meet the Crüe?” While the ages of the contest participants of course cannot be verified, the bio lists a number of letter entries purportedly written by young teenagers. A thirteen-year-old girl writes, “I’d do it with the Crüe ‘till black and blue is all you can see.” From a fifteen-year-old fan: “I’m a really big fan of Mötley Crüe’s and I would do anything to meet them … I love ‘em all. I would even get fucked by the ugliest, fattest, most disgusting guy in the world to meet them.” Another thirteen-year-old girl promises, “I’d leave my tits to Mötley Crüe.”

What is unfortunate about the Crüe example is not that girls of such an age should not be voicing sexual thoughts or taking an active role in exploring their sexuality. If anything, much of the discourse of the teenybopper (which assumes that the female audience is pre-sexual and therefore harmless) is insulting and dismissive of female sexuality. However, descriptions of such displays of aggressive sexuality are misleading when they are framed as rebellion yet function as a means of keeping the fans subordinate to the rock stars they pursue. Certainly, a Crüe fanatic who would literally do anything (or anyone) to meet the band might be dismayed to find herself wearing a “PSP pass (standing for ‘Pre-Show Pussy’ and indicating to the band that
the bearer has already ‘entertained’ the road crew in order to get the pass and hence best left untouched.)”66 With the power to grant and reject access to rock stars (and the power to name and shame female sex-seekers) ultimately resting out of the hands of the female fan, it is difficult to see this narrative of sexual rebellion as anything but depressingly status quo.

Within these biographies, rampant sexual speech by women is punishable by public shaming—even in bios of the heartthrobs who appeal to the younger crowd. In Wham! Young and Gunning, the pop duo describes their disgust with the press’ infatuation with their sex lives. Fending off multiple rumors about their loves lives (including rumored homosexuality, since confirmed by George Michael’s coming out of the closet in 1998), the group claims to lie about everything they tell the press in order to earn the reputations of playboys.67 The real venom is spewed by biographer Barry Grant in a passage describing a tell-all story (accompanied, apparently, by racy pictures) of two women in British tabloid The Sun claiming that they were both having affairs with Andrew Ridgeley. “Yes, folks, naughty bed-hopping Andrew had been two timing with both of them and the poor girls were forced to strip off and spill the whole sorry story to The Sun just to show how deeply and profoundly upset they really were. It makes the heart bleed.”68 The bio sarcastically continues: “As the girls honed their talons and tongues, each vowing to use every trick in the book to get ‘my Andy’ back under the duvet, it transpired that he hadn’t phoned either of them while he was away. Who can blame him?”69 The text does not explicitly state that either of the women is lying; the copy merely slams the women for seeking attention. The function of this narrative, then, is to invite judgment from the reader. The reader is supposed to despise the women who claim to have been with her idols. By inviting the shaming of frank female sexuality in criticizing these women, such narratives encourage fans to avoid
behaving the same way and simultaneously encourage fans to pass judgment on women who do
flaunt their sexuality publicly.

The woe-is-Wham story also reminds us of the gendered double standard governing
sexuality in general. The sexual charisma of a musical artist is generally described in very
positive terms in these biographies. Some, like a 1992 bio on Marky Mark, meticulously describe
the sexual power of the superstar in question and the magnetic power of man flesh. “The
attraction between Marky and the opposite sex is powerful, physical, very real,” enthuses one
passage. “[H]is outrageously suggestive gestures onstage leave little doubt as to his intent (and to
little else). The shirtless strutting, pelvic thrusting, bumping, grinding, crotch-grabbing, and
pants-dropping may well be precisely choreographed—but it has the desired effect.”

Unfortunately, Marky Mark’s pants-dropping charisma can lead to trouble when the
“desired effect” occurs. While the artist is free to be sexual, he does so from a privileged position
and thus is able to police the sexual behavior of his fans. The bio continues, “[D]espite his ready-
for-anything stage demeanor, off stage he’s a bit more circumspect. In a private moment with a
fan who was holding a very explicit banner (saying what she’d like to do with him), Marky
gently told her, ‘You really don’t want to be holding up a sign like that.’”

The young music fans who read these biographies are thus stuck between a proverbial
rock and a hard place. When fans are considered teenyboppers, they are dismissed by the
establishment as naïve and unimportant. When fans do express their sexual desires as they age,
they are subject to the same rigid boundaries that society imposes on female sexuality in general.
Neither image of fandom is particularly flattering; neither version of expressing fandom is
particularly heartening. Add to these discourses the other various means of policing fan behavior
that I have discussed (encouraged femininity and prescribed acts), and the portrait of gendered
fandom painted in these biographies and similar institutions is indeed a bleak one. However, as I will discuss in my concluding section, the concept of technologies of the self can offer a sense of empowerment for the female music fan and a way to reclaim the discourses that shape her experience.

**Conclusion: Technologies of the Self**

As I have argued, teen-oriented music biographies occupy a space where the discourse of the female consumer meets the discourse of the teenager. At this intersection, it is possible to read these biographies as one among a multitude of ways that culture disciplines young women—and a way in which young women learn to police themselves. Our identities always contain the power relations that are embedded within our lives and experiences. However, as I have discussed, female identity is not simply handed down through the cultural artifacts that women consume. All of us—regardless of gender identity, race or ethnicity, or age—play a part in the processes through which we become subjects.

Maria Pini writes that understanding these processes is key to a productive understanding of youth culture. For Pini, youth practices can be understood using Foucault’s concept of technologies of the self, which "include all of the different ways in which we 'work upon' our bodies so as to become a self and achieve a sense of fulfillment." Foucault wrote that subjectivity is produced out of our and others’ disciplining of bodies. Because power works through the management of bodies, then the individual body becomes a site of resistance. Technologies of the self work at the level of individual bodies. They are always historically and culturally specific and have context-creating power relations embedded within them. Pini claims that it is important to recognize the various ways young people negotiate these power relations through their own bodies. Young people “regulate and manage their own bodies, experiencing
them as sites of both pleasure and resistance—sometimes with the effect of producing the selves expected of them, sometimes with the effect of challenging those expectations.”

For example, Pini cites rave culture as a space where young people employ technologies of the self to create a particular identity: through pleasure-seeking dance, drugs, and dress, participants of rave culture strive to transcend their individual bodies in order to create a larger “spiritual body.” Although the body is often a site of control for youth (through the disciplinary practices of the school system, primarily), rave culture is one space in which young people can exert their own power over their bodies.

Popular music fandom is, then, a forum through which young women can exert power over their bodies and create their own subjectivation. For instance, the screaming, fainting, and general mob rule of Beatlemania is described by Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs as “the first and most dramatic uprising of women’s sexual revolution.” Indeed, there is something to be said for the spectacular value of thousands of girls exhibiting such public sexual catharsis. Throughout the sample of teen-oriented artist bios, many similar descriptions of fan reactions to their favorite artists testify to the self-making power of the girl among the screaming multitudes of fans. That power does not simply extend to public expressions of fandom: academic works from as early as 1977 have argued for the value of the private sphere in adolescent music fandom. Many technologies of the self—from the hanging of posters to frenetic air-guitar performances in front of a mirror—are wielded by young women in their bedrooms, possibly among friends but typically out of the public eye. There is something safe and sacred about the private spaces of music fandom: young women need this space to forge their identities, and they need music as a medium through which to do so.
As cultural artifacts and technologies of representation, teen-oriented artist biographies are part of the curious combination of institutions that constrain and discipline young women. They are also, however, part of the technologies of the self used by music fans to create a coherent identity. It is here where artifact embodiment and performance re-enter the conversation. If ownership and collection of these books provides young fans with chattel on to which they can project their fantasies and ideals, then it also can provide the powers that be with what they might see as tangible evidence of a fan’s poor taste. The mere existence and ownership of these books can be construed by some as one among many ways that girls are intellectually inferior, consumption-driven airheads. Regardless of the complexity of a young woman’s relationship with such texts, these possessions are both highly visible and ideologically loaded. As with the other learned embodied practices that accompany female adolescence (dieting, adornment, constrained body movements), the ownership and collection of such artifacts creates a precarious path for young women to negotiate.


2 To Foucault, pre-modern power worked through the implied physical presence of some type of sovereign power (the king, the judge—glibly stated, anyone who could respond with force to the question “You and whose army?”). Modern power, on the other hand, developed disciplinary techniques that allow it to operate less visibly and more efficiently than did pre-modern power. This power—disciplinary power—includes every day techniques of surveillance and the various institutions and regimens that create “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies.” See Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 138. Because power in this model is something that circulates at all levels of society (not simply as a top-down repressive force) and among all social and cultural institutions, power relations can be observed and analyzed effectively in local settings. Foucault’s writing focuses on the local classificatory and surveillance functions of disciplinary power—in the prison, the hospital, the school—not on any assumed global machinations of power. He observes that power should be studied in its "capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives." See Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 39.


5 Ibid., 80. The discussion of the prisoners of the Panopticon can be found in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202-203. Another well-known work of feminist scholarship that makes productive use of Foucault’s genealogy of power is Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

6 To Foucault, power does not simply repress bodies; it is a productive force. "[P]ower produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth." It also produces subjects. *Assujettissement*, the word used by Foucault in his untranslated writings, means both subjection (as in being subjected to, or being subordinate to certain social constraints) and becoming a subject within in a certain set of power relations and social constraints. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194 and Judith Butler, “Bodies and Power Revisited,” in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, eds. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 188.


9 Foucault was interested in the effects of power guaranteed by discourses and not particularly concerned with the origins of certain discourses or in whose interests discourses perform. My brief genealogy of the teen audience, then, is not a strict Foucauldian enterprise; rather, it is a history written with the assumption that the circulation of writing about teenybopper fandom was partially responsible for creating that identity—and partially responsible for the policing of feminine behaviors in this context.


13 Ibid., 43.

14 Ibid., 12-13.


18 Ibid., xv – xvii.

19 Ibid., 453.

21 Savage, 448-450.

22 Quoted in Savage, 452.

23 Ibid., 448.

24 Ibid., 449.

25 Schrum, 98.

26 Ibid., 124.


28 The term “teenybopper” here will be used to describe the youngest group of music fans—generally age 10 to 13—whose idols come to public prominence in three-year cycles. This definition comes from Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 226.

29 Reisfeld and Fields., vii.

30 Ibid., ix – xi.

31 Ibid., vii.


33 Reisfeld and Fields, xi.

34 Wenner, 98.

35 Ibid., 98.

36 As I mentioned in Chapter 1, my sampling technique involved visually identifying teen-oriented biographies held by the ML/SRA. The result was approximately 35 biographies representing the mid 1960s to the early 2000s. I estimate that the median year represented is 1991. These biographies were then scrutinized carefully to see what themes emerged from their contents.


40 “16 Wants You to Be the Perfect Fan: How to Be the Kind of Admirer Your Favorite Star Will Always Remember!” *16 Magazine*, Spring 2001, 15.

41 Ibid., 17.

43 Ibid., 50.


45 Though of course there is ample room for non-heteronormative sexuality in the ways that fans consume popular music, the discourse of the teen music fan as constructed by these texts is by large a white, middle-class, heterosexual narrative. Future research investigating queer readings of teen idol narratives would no doubt yield interesting results.


47 Wenner, 97.

48 Wenner, 96.


51 Marron, 26.

52 Reisfeld, *Debbie Gibson*, 59.

53 Marron, 84.


58 Wenner, 97.

59 This phrase was a direct quote from the biography on Marky Mark. See Randi Reisfeld, *Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), 80.


61 Ibid., 11-12

62 Ibid., 6.

63 Wenner, 151.


66 Ibid., 85.


69 Ibid., 49-50.


71 Ibid., 118.


73 Ibid., 167.

74 Ibid., 166.


CHAPTER V: EMPATHY, EMBODIMENT, AND THE LONG DISTANCE DEDICATION

In a 1982 Long Distance Dedication segment, a young man in North Carolina named Graham requests for *American Top 40* host Casey Kasem to play “Endless Love” for his fiancée:

Dear Casey, in 1976 at the age of 15, I developed a walking problem called dystonia. I couldn’t walk as well as everybody else, but my heart was no different. I knew what love was, but I didn’t have anyone to share it with. I was always scared to ask girls out. I was afraid of being rejected because of the way I walk. Just when I was about ready to give up on life, a wonderful and beautiful girl named Andy came into my life and completely turned it around. She taught me not to worry about what people thought or said. I’d finally found someone who was looking at my heart and not my legs.1

In the words of this dedication, there is both a refusal of and an affirmation of the limitations of the physical body. On the one hand, the writer insists that he is not defined by his dystonia (“My heart was no different.”) On the other hand, his newfound happiness in life is at least partially due to physical romantic love: he writes that he and Andy are engaged to be married and that “[he]’ll love every minute of it.” This particular dedication—and the interesting tensions between distance and immediate physicality that it evokes—are representative of similar themes and functions of the *American Top 40* Long Distance Dedication in general.

The Long Distance Dedication—consisting of a listener-penned narrative and song dedication read on air—was a segment of the venerable *American Top 40* radio countdown show introduced and popularized by the dulcet-toned Casey Kasem.2 In this chapter, I will use the *AT40* Long Distance Dedication to explore themes of embodiment and physicality within radio broadcast. What the sentimental, intimate LDD achieves (and thus what radio always does) is to
reaffirm and validate the importance of embodiment and all its accompanying frailties. Enduring physical separation, enduring physical traumas and heartaches, and enduring the physical loss of another human being close to us … however fraught with problems it is to be embodied, there is a beauty in the physical struggles recounted by these stories. Through the LDD, I will argue that in spite of radio’s reputation as a “live” medium with a difficult body to archive, it is still a tangible medium because it is all about touching. Unlike the performance of consuming recorded music, the performance of radio listening is not about touching stuff; it is about touching others.

Long ago committed to the archive, these Long Distance Dedications span the decade of the 1980s and geographically span the globe (North America, Europe, Asia, Australia). Their existence may not be a “live” one in broadcast terms, but in another way, they are live sources of hope, despair—and above all, human empathy.

Certainly, there are many valid ways of approaching this archive. One might easily listen to the same sample of LDDs that I did and instead choose to focus on the role of the popular music countdown in capturing the fleeting nature of young love described so often in these letters. One might take the existence of a 1986 dedication of Sting’s “Russians” by two twelve-year-old girls concerned about nuclear war as a quaint and laughable relic of Cold War paranoia. One might interpret the profit-seeking broadcast of earnest sentiment conveyed by letter writers as crass and commercially exploitative. Perhaps my chronic exposure to Casey Kasem’s soothing, hypnotic voice has weakened my critical faculties, but I choose to be a bit more romantic in my interpretation of these texts. To me, what is at stake in my chosen conceptualization of radio embodiment is no less than a foundation for viewing human relations on a global scale. Echoing Judith Butler in her 2004 book *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*, I argue that our bodies—as the frail, vulnerable, tangible media through
which we experience the world and other people—are also the common vehicles for gaining empathy toward others. Corporeal vulnerability, ultimately, is the key to seeing the world in a way that encourages collective responsibility. While it may seem like a stretch to claim that the extension of emotion-laden human drama via Top 40 radio might hold the key to ethical concern for humankind, we can certainly do worse than to listen to these stories with an empathetic appreciation of the physical dimensions of love and loss, of separation and reunion, endured by the letter writers.

From Disembodied Voices to the Radio Prosthesis: Understanding the Radio Body

Before I discuss the Long Distance Dedication in depth, I would like to briefly discuss the concept of embodiment in writings about radio in order to emphasize the role of intimacy (and, ultimately, empathy) in radio listening. In a 1924 essay in *Forum*, former *Scientific American* editor Waldemar Kaempffert muses on the topic of radio waves, which are both ubiquitous and unseen. “You look at the cold stars overhead, at the infinite void around you,” he writes. “It is almost incredible that all this emptiness is vibrant with human thought and emotion.” This romantic view of radio as a nearly magical medium whose invisible waves of content saturated the atmosphere and touched the ears and hearts of people around the nation was a common theme in writings from the 1920s and 1930s.

In the years just prior to the “golden age” of network radio listening in the United States, radio was frequently thought of as a strangely intimate medium. In the words of a 1936 book on radio aesthetics, radio channeled “voices without bodies.” This notion of disembodiment was key to radio’s uncanny charms. Even among today’s scholars and critics, the idea of radio’s transmission of non-corporeal voices holds romantic appeal. Susan J. Douglas writes in *Listening*
In: “[t]he fact that radio waves are invisible, emanate from ‘the sky,’ carry disembodied voices, and can send signal deep into the cosmos links us to a much larger, more mysterious order.”

As radio became a part of everyday life in the United States, the uncanny aspects of radio (the fact that the radio’s voices had no bodies, the fact that radio waves seemed to tap into a mysterious, unseen realm) slowly began to fade away. However, the intimacy that was established by these uncanny properties remained. Radio came to be thought of not as an eerie medium that transported disembodied voices, but as an everyday medium that intimately bridged the gap between physical bodies. “If success in communication was once the art of reaching across the intervening bodies to touch another’s spirit,” writes John Durham Peters in Speaking into the Air, “in the age of electronic media it has become the art of reaching across the intervening spirits to touch another’s body.” Intimacy in radio was and is about shortening this perceived distance.

The intimacy established by radio can also be traced to the empathetic projections of radio personalities onto their audiences (and, in turn, the audience’s reciprocation of those feelings). A 1935 book called Psychology of Radio offers advice to radio professionals seeking to establish a rapport with the invisible audience: “[n]o crowd can exist, especially no radio crowd, unless the members have a ‘lively impression of universality.’ Each individual must believe that others are thinking as he thinks and are sharing his emotions.” Here, we see radio both linking scattered bodies and allowing both performer and audience to imagine that an emotional connection exists in this interaction. We also see that this intimate linkage relies on empathy—on the assumption that one’s experiences and values will resonate with others’ experience and values. The desire to establish a rapport with others in this interaction illustrates
radio’s “function as a desiring mechanism that links the individual to the collectivity, the human to the machine, spaces geographically distant to each other.”

Given the radio’s role as a desiring mechanism (indeed, even as an extension of the physical body, as I will discuss) and tangible link among bodies, it is no surprise that many writers have curiously likened radio itself to a body. Though writers who have used the body simile have read different implications into the issues of radio and embodiment, I argue that the simile nonetheless says a lot about radio’s role in American culture: claiming embodiment on behalf of radio ascribes a sense of liveness and human performance to the medium.

One writer who insisted on the radio body simile was the often acerbic Frankfurt school scholar Theodor Adorno, who wrote what would eventually become *Current of Music* in the late 1930s while working for the Princeton Radio Research Project early in his American residency. The radio research questions provided for him by PRRP director Paul Lazarsfeld were practical, empirical concerns about maximizing radio’s audience-reaching potential, but Adorno dismissed such questions in favor of writing about the ideological implications of radio’s structure. First, Adorno viewed “the radio” not as the sum total of the technology, industry, broadcast, and reception of radio, but as a shifting, messy body comprised of all these elements. He used the term “physiognomy” to refer to these components because regardless of the multitude of institutions that formed radio, he claimed that they tended to speak with a single, unified voice out of the radio box. In *Current of Music*, Adorno writes that he uses the body simile “because the phenomena we are studying constitute a unity comparable to that of a human face.”

Radio’s human face created a type of intimacy, but to Adorno, this intimacy had frightening ideological implications. Radio’s intimacy was insidious because it took advantage of the listener’s privacy. A technology with a human face, radio presented ideas in an intimate
setting to listeners who were isolated and thus would have difficulty imagining themselves as part of a potentially resistant collective. Thus, to Adorno, radio’s intimacy made listeners more susceptible to authoritarian influence. Such ideological concern is classic Adorno. For the purposes of this chapter, however, what is truly striking about *Current of Music* is Adorno’s insistence on personifying and embodying radio. “Radio speaks to us even when we are not listening to a speaker,” he writes. “It might grimace; it might shock us; it might even raise its eyes at the very moment we suddenly realize that the inarticulate sounds pouring from the loudspeaker are taking the shape of a piece of music which particularly touches us.”

While Adorno saw radio’s human face as the point of contact between radio and its listeners, others have explored the idea that radio could be an extension of the human body, or, as Marshall McLuhan speculated, an externalization of the human body. In a 1964 essay in *The Nation*, McLuhan claims that “[t]oday men’s nerves surround us; they have gone outside as electrical environment.” The “electrical environment” McLuhan refers to is, of course, telecommunications media. He goes on to compare the body’s biological “programming” to that of a telecommunications network: “[t]he human nervous system itself can be reprogrammed biologically as readily as any radio network can alter its fare.”

Exploring the radio body is not simply a matter of relishing the joining of human bodies to the external electrical environment; the radio can also function as an extension of the listener’s body to touch the world outside—or, in the words of Sandy Stone, as a prosthesis. In an engaging, romantic essay about radio listening, Stone describes listening to a crystal radio set as a child in 1950. “I could take a couple of coils of wire and a hunk of galena and send a whole part of myself into the ether. An extension of my will, my instrumentality—that’s a prosthesis, all right,” Stone avows.
Taking Stone’s idea of the radio prosthesis together with other writers who are fascinated by the radio body, one begins to see a reciprocal, embodied relationship between the radio and the human body. Radio has been described alternately as a human face, an external human body, and a body prosthesis. No wonder, then, that Susan Douglas claims that United States Baby Boom identity was forged with radio embedded into their bodies, minds, and souls. She writes that radio has played a crucial role “in constructing us as a new entity: the mass-mediated human, whose sense of space and time, whose emotional repertoires and deepest motivations cannot be extricated from what has emanated through the airwaves.”

This notion of the embodied, embedded radio informs my reading of the Long Distance Dedication. I will examine three common themes in the Long Distance dedication, all of which have issues of embodiment at heart. In later sections of this chapter, I will discuss narratives of physical limits and obstacles, of separation and reunion, and, finally, the dedication as an extension of the body. The last theme includes dedications that serve as representatives of the letter writers. In the introduction to the LDD segment, AT40 host Casey Kasem frequently says that a song says things for us that we sometimes cannot and does things for us that we cannot do. If the Long Distance Dedication is about reaching across space to make a connection from one body to another body through a song, then that song does become a sort of prosthesis for the letter writer. Before I explore this and other themes, however, I will elaborate a bit more on the background and setup of my LDD sample.

*American Top 40 in the Archives: Background and Methods*

When touring the Bowling Green State University campus for the first time as a prospective doctoral student, I learned that the Sound Recordings Archives owns the complete run of *American Top 40* broadcasts on vinyl. Well, perhaps not the *complete* run: AT40’s
inaugural broadcast was in 1970, and it has continued all the way up to the present day (its current incarnation is hosted by American Idol’s Ryan Seacrest). The SRA does, however, own AT40 discs from throughout Casey Kasem’s initial stint as host (from 1970 until 1988). Although the AT40 collection is only one among many treasures in the archives—life-size cardboard stand-up of Lionel Richie, I’m looking at you—its presence has stuck in my mind all throughout my graduate school career at Bowling Green.

I grew up listening to American Top 40 and its competition (Casey’s Top 40, which Kasem started after an AT40-related contract dispute). The cadence of Kasem’s voice as he introduces the Long Distance Dedication segment is as ingrained into my mind as is the Pledge of Allegiance, or the painful strains of my fifth grade music class’s gym performance of a musical program called Top 40 (sample lyrics: “Top 40! / Toooop 40! / You can hear it on the radio!”) or any other of those bizarre bits of culture that make such an impression on the malleable minds of children. Though it no longer airs, the Long Distance Dedication has been recognized as one of the most popular segments of American Top 40 since the segment began in 1978. It remained popular on the show throughout the Shadoe Stevens era (1988-1995) and the second Casey Kasem era (1998-2003).

I knew that I wanted to include the Long Distance Dedication in my project, particularly when I realized that the inclusion of an old, syndicated radio broadcast would present a challenge to my claims about recorded music and tangibility. After listening to them, I have realized how much embodiment is a part of the basic narrative of the Long Distance Dedication. I see, too, the breadth of performances involved in submitting them, in Kasem’s readings of them, and in the audience’s listening to them and empathizing with them. As it turns out, obtaining a sample of AT40 episodes from the SRA archives turned out to be more challenging than I would realize.
The SRA collection of *AT40* episodes consists of hundreds of LPs. Early in my tenure as a grad student, the collection of *AT40* recordings—which was large, cumbersome, took up a lot of shelf space, and rarely used—was moved to the university library’s regional depository for long-term storage. Now bound to a pallet in a large warehouse, identifiable only by barcodes corresponding to portions of the collection, the *AT40* recordings seemed almost unattainable. I decided, out of convenience, to try to obtain my sample through other means.

I had been spending my weekend listening to old broadcasts of *AT40* aired by Premiere Radio Networks in a syndication package called *American Top 40: The ‘80s*. I started amassing a collection of LDD recordings by patching out of my computer’s sound card into its line input and recording and editing the broadcasts using audio editing software. I collected about 50 Long Distance Dedication mp3s this way, and they comprise the bulk of my sample. I located other broadcasts via the Internet. An active, thriving community of *AT40* broadcast collectors exists even in 2010, and their activity on Internet forums indicates that radio broadcast collecting is still a peer-to-peer, word-of-mouth activity. I put the edited snippets on my iPod and listened to Long Distance Dedications everywhere I went. They became part of *my* collection and my life this way, and I came to know them... well... intimately, I suppose. This informal style of gathering and observing data is definitely in keeping with the intent to listen and write empathetically that I have already outlined in this chapter.

Before I delve into the specific themes about embodiment and empathy in the Long Distance Dedication, it would be helpful to identify what is lacking in my analysis. As I have already argued, I believe that the sharing of stories through vehicles like the LDD can point toward a way of viewing the world and its inhabitants empathetically. As many conceptual leaps as it may take to get from a cross-country dedication of “Back on My Feet Again” to a theory of
collective global responsibility based on ethical treatment of the other, I nonetheless think that radio can and does play a significant role in how we come to understand the lives of others. However, I would be remiss if I did not point out that radio has also had a history of reinforcing divisions—of race and ethnicity, geography and class, and gender.22

Michele Hilmes writes that radio played a role in “constructing a national norm of ‘whiteness’ that emphasized the differences between ‘black’ and ‘white’ while working to erase distinctions between groups of European descent.”23 In the pre-television days of radio network dominance, radio was thought of as the nation’s voice—not in that there was a single, national voice, but in that the voice that dominated others was a white, middle-class, male voice with no ethnic markers.24 Although historians have made rich documentation of the significant number of radio stations catering to non-white communities,25 the prevalence of racism in radio broadcast history (for example, the racial ventriloquy of Amos ‘n’ Andy) indicates that the issue of difference in radio is a complex, troublesome one.26 These issues are addressed in other scholarship and, unfortunately, cannot be adequately addressed here.

I do acknowledge that the Long Distance Dedication has an allure that can bring people together—and also has a romantic gloss that tends to obscure issues of difference. In this light, I suppose it is true that this syndicated radio program is “whitewashed,” so to speak, with details about racial and ethnic, socioeconomic, and sexual difference often absent entirely, subsumed by the narrative as told by Casey Kasem’s distinctive voice. However, it is worth mentioning that the voice behind American Top 40—though it may be reinforcing radio’s norm of whiteness in some ways—in another way is representative of the United States’ diverse ethnic composition. Casey Kasem’s parents were Lebanese Druze immigrants, and he has been actively involved with the Arab American Institute for several years.27 The Arab American Institute Foundation
even published a brochure in 2006 authored by Kasem titled “Arab Americans: Making a
Difference.”28 Such visible, public ethnic pride on Kasem’s part is yet another contextual factor
that makes the issue of difference in these broadcasts a complex and nuanced one.

As I will discuss, difference is a common theme in these dedications. In keeping with the
focus on embodiment, it typically takes the form of physical difference. Ultimately, however, the
point of these dedications is to find a common, human bond between the letter writers and the
listeners. It is to the dedications themselves that I now turn.

**Limits and Obstacles of Physical Bodies**

The same interactions among identity, embodiment, and the extension of embodiment
that have surfaced in writings about radio in general repeat themselves in the contents of these
dedications. A common theme in the Long Distance Dedication is that of overcoming physical
obstacles—generally, those of frailty or weakness associated with disease or disability. A typical
dedication is written by a close friend or family member, like a letter from a young camp
counselor named C.J. in Hilton, New York. Part of his job as a counselor was to lead students on
a hike up a mountain. Recently, he and his fellow camp counselor, Heather, were introduced to a
new camper named John, a 13-year-old boy from Ohio who had cerebral palsy. When John
wanted to accompany the other campers on the strenuous mountain hike,

- the familiar trip was a brand new experience. Another counselor, Heather, and I started
  up the trail with John keeping right up. His stamina amazed us, but towards the top of the
  mountain, John’s legs wouldn’t work correctly anymore due to exhaustion. For the rest of
  the five-hour trip, I carried John on my shoulders. Heather, John, and I gave each other
  strength as we found ourselves lost with five other children to look after.
The campers and counselors eventually found their way back to camp. C.J. writes that although they told many people about the wonderful level of teamwork they had experienced, “I don’t think anyone could know the joy and beauty the three of us found because of the trip. Heather and I would like to thank John for being the special person he is. John, we love you.” C.J. ends the letter with a request for the Simon and Garfunkel song “Bridge over Troubled Water” for John and a heartfelt (if somewhat clichéd) reflection: “[i]n many ways, it was he who carried me and my fears down that mountain that day.”

An interesting thematic similarity between C.J.’s and similar dedications is the insistence on strength. On the one hand, strength is considered a trait of character that exists outside the physical body. The people being honored by these letters are described as having immense strength of will, and the letter writers are inspired to develop similar strength. On the other hand, the development of that strength (like the strength in the bond among C.J., John, and Heather) is entirely dependent on the “weakness” of the physical body. In the second dedication of the same 1985 episode that aired C.J.’s letter, Casey read another letter about strength in the face of physical weakness. Twenty-four-year-old Lori from Pennsylvania dedicates Matthew Wilder’s “Break My Stride” to her older brother, Bob, “who has had a “hard, struggling life.” She recounts her brother’s struggles with Type I diabetes, which included multiple trips to the hospital with Bob’s life in peril. Through Bob’s teen years, Lori writes that “it was tough enough, yet lately, it’s gotten even harder. Bob is now legally blind from his diabetes, and recently, he went through a kidney transplant. He came through the operation fine, and today he’s doing good.” She goes on to describe Bob as “a giver and a high-spirited person” who volunteers at the hospital to repay the kindness that has been given to him by caring medical professionals. Lori also professes admiration for her family for all the care they have provided
for her brother. Though she often fears for her brother’s health, she insists that “at the times when he needed us most, it turns out he’s the one who gives us the strength to believe and hope.”

Casey introduces a dedication from a Michigan girl to her severely arthritic grandfather as “a dedication about strength.” The letter describes the grandfather’s life as one of extreme discomfort: his condition requires him to use crutches to walk and prohibits him from sitting easily or bending most of his joints. “My grandfather has never brought me to the park, never played ball with me, or sat down to watch an old Western movie with me,” she writes, and he regrets that he cannot offer her the kind of activity-based relationship that most grandfathers enjoy with their grandchildren. She insists that he has offered her something greater: “He’s taught me how to face my problems and fears. My grandfather taught me how to build courage from strife. He’s also shown me a great deal of love and how much there is to live for.” The letter ends with a request for Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All”—a saccharine song that has the (dubious?) honor of being the fourth most requested Long Distance Dedication song of all time at fourteen total plays.

It may seem a bit harsh to make such a judgment on a song whose enduring popularity does suggest that it resonated with radio listeners. Still, this is the song that begins with the egregious lyrics “I believe the children are our future / Teach them well and let them lead the way / Show them all the beauty they possess inside.” Houston’s grand performance of those lyrics coupled with the song’s overdone production (the synth strings and splashy drum reverb that are watermarks of the era’s schmaltziest ballads) indicate that the song itself is not a timeless document. Nor do the LDD letters, filled as they are with earnest clichés (“It was he who gave me strength”), typically contain novel insights about the world.
I do not make these observations to claim expertise about popular music or make a value judgment about popular taste. These observations do, however, contribute to my argument that the empathy solicited and earned via radio storytelling is ultimately tied to something universal: the vulnerability of the human body—not necessarily the particular affective qualities of a given song. While listening to a number of Long Distance Dedications from the 1980s, the 2010 listener might occasionally let out a good-natured groan at the ten-year-old girl who asks Casey to “[p]lease dedicate ‘One Moment in Time’ by Whitney Houston to all the homeless.”33 However, I challenge anyone not to be touched when listening to the embodied struggles that crystallize just below the treacle.34 The cultural trappings of these texts—the music styles and common literary tropes deployed by the letter writers—may become dated and seem quaint, but at their heart (if you will pardon the metaphor) lies the human body as a common source of human experience.

The embodied struggles described in these dedications do vary beyond the scenario where a traditionally “healthy” person expresses admiration for a loved one who struggles with disease or physical discomfort. A 1980 letter from Hoosick Falls, New York emphasizes the importance of overcoming physical insecurity and being comfortable with one’s body. Adam writes, “My problem is that I’m 19 years old and because of a hormone imbalance, I’m only 4 feet, 3 and a half inches tall. My height, or actually my insecurity about my height, made it very hard for me to establish personal relationships, which in turn made me feel constantly depressed and lonely.” In the summer of 1977, Adam met a girl named Wilma who tried, at first unsuccessfully, to make him feel better about himself. To get him to feel comfortable with his height, she insisted that he listen to the Randy Newman song “Short People.” To Adam, this “was the most offensive and cruel song I’d ever heard.” Wilma, on the other hand, believed that
the song would be the perfect medium through which she could encourage him to stop feeling so insecure. “A month later,” he writes, “through the help of Wilma and that song, I was able to laugh and joke about my problem for the first time in my life. I felt as if a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders. Since that time, I have grown and matured emotionally and socially, have made friends, and have become a normal and happy person.”

Adam’s letter ends on a sad note with the revelation that Wilma had moved cross-country with her family and that the two had lost touch. The Long Distance Dedication became the only way he could express his gratitude for her role in his struggle to love and accept his body. Not surprisingly, it is not uncommon for LDDs to combine the themes of physical struggle and physical separation. With the addition of physical distance between the letter writer and the dedicatee, there is a great insistence on recognizing the loved ones’ struggle and letting them know that others are fighting alongside them, even if only in spirit.

An example of physical struggle rendered more painful by great physical distance can be found in an LDD letter written by a U.S. Air Force captain stationed in West Germany. Her husband, Gary, is also in the Air Force, she writes. He had enjoyed a successful career and a reputation as being a “good stick” (good pilot) until he was in a horrible one-car accident that “would have left anyone else dead.” The collision ejected him 60 feet from the car, with the seat taking the brunt of the impact. German doctors were able to save his left arm, and he was flown to a military hospital in the United States for further surgery. She continues, explaining that doctors were hoping to restore his badly damaged arm… and that Gary had undergone and would continue to undergo a great deal of painful physical therapy and surgery. “Casey, there were two things in the world he cared about: me and flying,” she writes. “I never dared question the order of importance. It’s been a long time since we saw each other, and I’m not sure when
we’ll be together again, but across the Atlantic Ocean, I’d like to tell him that I still love him, and he still flies high with me.”37 The experience of physical trauma and discomfort, the pain of physical separation, and the hope of reunion: in spite of the specificity of each story, the general experiences of these letter writers unite to form a cohesive narrative of human physical struggle. In the next section, I will further explore the themes of separation and reunion in these dedications.

**Separation and Reunion**

Given that this long-running *AT40* segment is titled “Long Distance Dedication,” it seems logical that most of the letters would involve enduring physical separation (and hopes for physical reunion). Though this theme is a common one, a significant proportion of the LDDs that I sampled (roughly one third of them) did not involve physical separation or distance at all. “The purpose of our long distance dedications is to share a feeling that’s expressed best by a song,” is how Casey typically introduces the LDD. Physical separation is not necessarily a prerequisite, but the intimacy of radio combined with the affective qualities of the requested songs does tend to add poignancy to the letters that involve great geographical distance. For example, fifteen-year-old Holly from Smithtown New York requests the Stylistics’ “You Make Me Feel Brand New” for her adoptive mother in a 1980 dedication: “She raised us from poor, homeless children, taught us life’s good and bad points, and helped us through bad breaks. She was always there to lean on. Her shoulder was always there to cry on. And it still is. Now, she’s in Arizona with a sick aunt. We don’t know when she’ll be back, may take weeks.” Her mother’s physical absence makes Holly appreciate her mother’s love and selflessness. “[W]henver a crisis comes up, she’s always there to make somebody feel that there’s someone who cares.”38 Bridging geographic
distance, the radio dedication amplifies the letter writer’s appreciation of the dedicatee’s physical presence.

Not surprisingly, many separation-themed dedications are about romantic love. The geographic distance between these would-be lovers, current lovers, or former lovers (and sometimes, combinations of the three) often works to fuel romantic longing or wistful nostalgia. Others are, plainly and simply, charming narratives expressing fondness and hope. A letter from Glenroy in Trinidad describes meeting a wonderful girl at the 1981 World Table Tennis Championships held in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. “Every day, I played my heart out for my country, winning and also losing,” he writes. Then, at the farewell party, he met Francisca, a fellow table tennis player representing Switzerland. He asked her to dance, and she agreed. “I never experienced anything so natural,” he writes.

I felt that I knew her all my life, and it seemed it was meant to be. It last for about five hours, and believe me, those hours I spent with her were some of the best I’ve ever spent. We had to say goodbye the same night because our planes were due to leave the next day. We still write to each other a lot, and although we live in different worlds, I feel that one day we’ll relive those moments we spent together. 39

Glenroy then asks Casey to play the Beatles’ “Got to Get You into My Life” for Francisca. Hearing the dedication, one cannot help but hope that Glenroy and Francisca were able to bridge the geographical distance between them … and that they are still together, perhaps playing table tennis as they travel the European countryside together in a customized recreational vehicle.

My hope for Glenroy and Francisca is more than a mere fanciful aside. A listener’s hope that two lovers separated by great distance might be reunited speaks to another component of radio listening that encourages empathy: that of imagination. According to Susan Douglas, the
missing of the sense of imagination stimulated by radio is also a major reason for the sense of 
nostalgia surrounding the medium. “Listening to radio [is] like being a child again, having stories 
read to you… [those who are nostalgic for radio’s golden age] miss their role in completing the 
picture, in giving individual meaning to something that went out to a mass audience.”\(^{40}\) Cheap, 
endless customization via the human imagination is what radio storytelling encourages. Of 
course, your version of Glenroy’s story might be very different from mine. Perhaps in your mind,
Glenroy and Francisca tragically and coincidentally choked on ping pong balls before their 
triumphant reunion. I think that the hopeful version of the story, however, is likely the more 
popular imagined version. Absorbing a story aurally requires that the listener be invested in the 
story and its characters in order to create a logical mental map of the narrative. Generally, a 
feeling of investment into a narrative can lead to empathy and a hope that everything works out 
well for the story’s characters.

Many of the LDDs about romantic love and physical distance conclude without the letter 
writer’s stating that they wish to eliminate that distance. In many cases, the physical distance is 
just enough space for letter writers to cast a rosy, romantic glow over the memory of a brief 
relationship. Such is the case in a dedication from 19-year-old Sandy in North Carolina to a 
Dayton, Ohio beau named Cary. The letter describes a rough period in Sandy’s life that 
culminated in an suicide attempt. After her first love left her for another woman, “the whole 
world seemed to crash in on [her].” She continues, “I felt that no one cared for me, so in my 
despair, I took a drug overdose to end all the pain. I awoke two days later in a nearby hospital in 
intensive care after being in a coma. After that experience, my life slowly began to change.” 
Sandy learned that she had many friends who cared about her and, finally, she met a caring, 
sensitive man while on vacation in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. “He looked just like Rod
Stewart, but he had a blond moustache,” she writes. “I spent only a short time with him, but they were the greatest moments in my life. He made me forget all about my old boyfriend. It was love at first sight, and I’ll never forget it. But, it had to come to an end. He was leaving for Ohio in the morning. We only had time for a kiss, and he was gone.” Sandy ends the letter by dedicating Rod Stewart’s “You’re in My Heart” to Cary.41

Of course, although the letter was ostensibly a simple thank-you for the wonderful time the two had spent together, the listener cannot help but wonder if Sandy wished to reconnect with her mustachioed mystery man. She did, after all, include in her letter that “he drove a silver Toyota Corolla with the driver’s side dented.”42 Did she envision an emotional reunion with Cary? Her letter leaves the issue unresolved. A similar romantic dedication from 1987 ends with the same question about the possibility of reunion. Walter in New York describes a magical relationship with a woman named Diane. During their young romance, the two were often separated by work obligations and then joyfully reunited. He recounts one instance of meeting Diane in front of Bloomingdale’s in Midtown Manhattan: he picked her up, spun her around, and a crowd of people who were watching applauded as if the two lovebirds were living in a real-life romantic comedy. Alas, Diane soon left Walter and moved to Europe with another man. “I’d never heard from her for 6 years, until recently,” he writes. “She wrote to say that we had been naïve, but that the passion was very real. She’s unhappy, she says, disillusioned by life and marriage. Nothing for her went according to plan. She writes, ‘I’ve stopped searching for my happiness.’” Walter adds that Diane sent him a picture of herself—and that she was still beautiful. “I wish her eyes would glow once more with a faint glimmer of hope,” he muses. “There was such beauty there.” His letter ends with a request to play “Never Surrender” for Diane, wherever she may be.43
Walter’s letter illustrates one of the great truths (and, not coincidentally, one of the great clichés) about romance and distance. Absence truly makes the heart grow fonder. Had he and Diane remained blissfully coupled, the last six years would have no doubt yielded their own problems: whether they should have children, why Walter simply cannot be civil when Diane’s mother comes to visit, how Diane leaves the top off the toothpaste lid every single time she uses it. Through the wistful veil of time, distance, and the romantic medium of radio, the couple’s time together was the stuff of dreams. Though many of these dedications are about trying to bridge physical distance, sometimes the physical distance creates an aura of closeness.

In many circumstances, however, physical reconnection is the ultimate goal of the Long Distance Dedication. For those who have experienced separation and then reunion, the resulting closeness comes from gratitude that family is safe and relationships are intact. For example, Kambu, a teenage boy originally from Cambodia but living in Stone Mountain, Georgia, requests Louis Armstrong’s classic “What a Wonderful World” to his family—concluding that “[w]hat makes the world such a wonderful place for me is these people.” His letter relates a frightening tale of separation, fear, and heartache. He writes, “When I was 7, during the tragic war in Cambodia, I was separated from my family. Everyone in our village panicked when the Khmer Rouge attacked.” Two younger sisters in tow, he ran and was escorted to safety by his aunt to a refugee camp near the border of Thailand. Though Kambu felt frightened and lonely without his parents, his aunt’s love and care made his heartache easier to bear. “Then one night, after I’d done my work at the refugee camp, I came back to find my whole family standing before my eyes. They were very skinny. Their clothes were torn and tattered. But we were together again at last,” he writes.
After many years of further separation, both families eventually reunited once more in the United States. “The tears, joy, and love once again filled our hearts. It was hard to find the words to express my gratitude [to my aunt] for what she had done for my sisters and me.” What more could one ask for than a family’s safe and happy reunion in the wake of such catastrophic circumstances?

The LDD, Bodily Extension, and the Projection of Identity

Thus far, I have discussed issues of embodiment in the Long Distance Dedication and have argued that this emphasis on embodiment is partially responsible for creating empathetic listeners. I have focused so far on narratives about physical strife and on narratives about the physical separation and reunion of bodies. In the final section of the discussion, I return to the notion of the radio prosthesis. In his introductions to the LDD segment, Casey Kasem often states that the songs of the long distance dedication share a feeling better than mere words ever could. LDDs often function as a letter writer’s chosen representative (or avatar, if you will), announcing news or sharing emotions that are difficult to express. In this manner, the Long Distance Dedication almost becomes an extension of the listener’s body and identity. It becomes a way of projecting one’s identity (or, in the words of Sandy Stone, one’s instrumentality) and touching other bodies.

Take, for example, the 1985 letter from twenty-year-old Betty Jo in Moatsville, West Virginia. Betty Jo begins her letter by informing Casey that she has had rheumatoid arthritis since she was a baby. “I can walk a little bit with the aid of a walker, but most of my time is spent in a wheelchair,” she writes. In the past year, Betty Jo has grown to love classical music after seeing the film Amadeus and being inspired by Tom Hulce, the actor who portrayed the famous composer. “I hated classical music until Tom came along with Amadeus,” she writes.
“I’m now a fan of both Tom Hulce and Wolfgang Mozart. I even started a scrapbook about Tom.” Betty Jo then asks Casey to play an excerpt from the popular *Hooked on Classics* series for Tom Hulce. “Tom has made such a great difference in my life,” she concludes. To Betty Jo, the long distance dedication is a musical projection of her body to reach an individual who otherwise would not be accessible to her. The fact that she included details about her rheumatoid arthritis indicates that she found this extension of her body and personality meaningful.

Betty Jo is not the only LDD writer, however, who used this forum to attempt contact with a celebrity. A 1984 letter from Nancy in Maryville, Tennessee also dedicates a song to a celebrity—“to the one person who’s given me the most encouragement I’ve ever known.” In the letter, she describes how Michael Jackson’s music has become part of her identity. Nancy’s parents died when she was a young child, and she grew up under the care of her strict, undemonstrative grandmother. As a growing teenager, Nancy laments that she has had to face life choices alone and that life has been incredibly difficult. “But what most people find in a family, I’ve found in an album, *Thriller,*” she writes. “Each song presented meaning to me at one time or another.” Nancy’s LDD letter documents her trials as a high school senior trying to finance her college degree.

When I feel I can’t do it, I flip my cassette recorder to full volume and drift away with Michael in one of my dreams of being somebody someday. It gives me unknown strength to carry on and not give up on my hopes and dreams. I sometimes lay awake at night and wonder after reading all the gossip sheets and their stories of Michael if he, too, is lonely. If he, like me, cries because he’s afraid of an unknown fear, one that he can’t really touch, but one that he knows is there. I wonder if he needs a friend, as I do.
She then asks Casey to play “Hello” by Lionel Richie for Michael, whose music keeps her “shooting for those stars that are so unattainable without encouragement and someone to look up to.”

The description of Nancy as she turns on her cassette player and lets her dreams take flight is particularly touching. Anyone who has ever had a similar experience of adolescent isolation knows how the songs that one listens to during those times become part of one’s identity. Their sentiments become absorbed into the teenage body, and the teen’s life experiences in turn project themselves onto the songs; as Nancy describes in her letter, her desire for understanding and her loneliness are projected onto the malleable, imagined celebrity body. The LDD becomes an instrument of projection, a means of rewriting the external world to reflect one’s dreams and desires.

“When words can’t say it, music becomes the only language we have. That’s what our Long Distance Dedications are all about,” Casey says in a typical LDD introduction. In many cases, the letter writer is using the long distance dedication to express a sentiment via the airwaves that would be simply too difficult to express face-to-face. Steve in Booneville, Indiana asks Casey to dedicate Barry Manilow’s “Could It Be Magic” to a girl named Pam. He writes that her “smile makes my knees grow weak and my heart pound furiously, and whose eyes can warm my heart on the coldest day in winter.” Steve writes that he has attempted to tell the beguiling Pam how he feels, but his physical body makes the task nearly impossible. “Whenever I try talking to her, my heart speeds up, and I usually end up saying something stupid.” The LDD letter, he feels, is the only way he can say the words he wants to say. “It took me a long time to work up the nerve to write this letter because I’m somewhat afraid of her finding out my feelings
and her reaction to them. But all fears and anxieties aside, I still want her to find out,” he writes.  

Mustering up the courage to tell someone an unpleasant truth is, of course, not limited to the domain of romantic love. Casey introduces an LDD letter from Laura in Phoenix, Arizona with the assertion that “[s]ometimes, a song fills in for the missing courage it takes to say something.” Laura is writing to Paula and Jeff, her two best friends in Medford, Oregon. As the result of a custody arrangement between her divorced parents, Laura left her mother and her life in Oregon behind for six months in order to live with her father and stepmother in Arizona. Laura’s mother, she reveals, was in favor of Laura’s move to Arizona. Laura’s friends, however, saw the move as a permanent separation. “I swore that no matter what, I’d come back. But both Paula and Jeff said they thought I’d change my mind and wouldn’t return,” she writes. “Well, they were right. It’s six months later, and I’ve decided to stay. It was the hardest decision that I’ve ever had to make. And I haven’t got what it takes to tell them I’m staying, and a telephone call or a letter couldn’t express how much they’ll always mean to me.” Laura requests Orleans’ “Still the One” for her friends with the reminder “that I’ll always be thinking of them.”  

In Laura’s case, the long distance dedication serves as her representative. Communicating sensitive information to others can be a tricky proposition, and many letter writers wonder if they could ever find the right words to say. The LDD does the talking for them. Circumstances and the people involved may vary, but the feelings embodied by these dedications (uncertainty, feeling torn, regret) are relatable to anyone who has ever wanted to share part of themselves but minimize the hurt associated with that vulnerability. Finally, the long distance dedication can project an additional sensory dimension onto already-established, distant relationships. A touching letter from Sue in Melbourne, Australia
uses the LDD forum to celebrate silence. Sue writes to Casey about a dear friend of hers, a pen pal from Downey, California named Joanne. The two have a lot in common, Sue writes, and they have enjoyed years of friendship via their letters. For example, Joanne encouraged Sue to quit the college that she was unhappy with and enroll in a different school to pursue her dream of becoming a drama and English teacher.

It was through Joanne’s words of faith and her confiding in me about her similar life that I enrolled in a normal college to become a high school teacher. But just before I changed colleges, my mother died suddenly. It was, again, through Joanne’s letters that I found courage—just when I was retreating into my world of poetry and books and beginning to give up my life at college altogether. Joanne has been my pillar of power at times when I felt lowest. For that, I’d like to thank her in this small way. Our friendship is silent.

Words upon paper form the links of our ocean-spanning friendship.  

Sue concludes the letter by requesting Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sounds of Silence” to honor the pair’s unique friendship. The Long Distance Dedication adds an embodied dimension to the friendship: though tangible letters have formed the bridge between the two women’s physical selves, their bond is now strengthened through the intimate voice of the radio body.

**Conclusion: Radio Liveness, the Archive, and the Repertoire**

In his book *Haunted Media*, Jeffrey Sconce writes that the history of electronic media has been characterized by an insistence on liveness. Beginning with telegraphy and ending with television (and including, of course, radio), Sconce discusses “this animating, at times occult, sense of ‘liveness,’” which has been captured by cultural critics with terms varying from “‘presence,’ ‘simultaneity,’ ‘instaneity,’ ‘immediacy,’ ‘now-ness,’ ‘present-ness,’” and “‘intimacy.’” Radio has often been characterized as an “intimate” medium, and, as I have
discussed, pieces of radio history such as the Long Distance Dedication seem to reaffirm that intimacy. It is my assertion that radio broadcasts retain that sense of “liveness” even after they are relegated to the archive. Television and radio “liveness” are frequently discussed in terms of simultaneity. In other words, the listener or viewer is observing events that are happening in real time. Any closeness or intimacy the audience feels is a result of knowing that their participation is temporally linked with the programming. However, simultaneity is not required for the liveness I am ascribing to radio (and, more specifically, the Long Distance Dedication). It is also worth mentioning that, as Philip Auslander points out, the distinction between “live” and “mediatized” is much more fluid than the simple binary suggests. The idea of “liveness” is historically constituted and constantly in flux. In this case, liveness is a dissolution of boundaries: it involves the incorporation of technologies of representation into the patterns of one’s embodied life and identity. In the words of Jeffrey Sconce, the concept of liveness “leads to a unique compulsion that ultimately dissolves boundaries between the real and the electronic.”

Here, it would be helpful to revisit the idea of performance. As I have argued earlier in the project, performance encompasses more than just the realm of embodied practices enacted by human participants. Artifacts can perform, too. Tangible musical performances (that I am referring to as technologies of representation) include things like records, press kits, fan-made materials, and artist biographies—artifacts that express artist, fan, and industry identity. Radio broadcast archives, too, constitute performances. Even when committed to the archive (and thus no longer “live” in the traditional sense of the word,” radio retains a sense of liveness. Long Distance Dedication letters demonstrate that listeners forge their identities at least partially through the incorporation of songs and stories into their lives. This act of incorporation suggests
that the body/bodies of radio listeners become a type of archive—a live archive, if you will, in that memories are stored in our collective body and our individual bodies.

The implication for this notion of the live archive is that sharing stories with others via media engenders feelings of empathy toward others and, ultimately, feelings of collective responsibility. Though Long Distance Dedications are no longer being written and shared, they are still being broadcast via a Premiere Radio Networks syndication package of unedited *American Top 40* shows.\(^{56}\) There is a new body of radio and Internet listeners who tune in, and their experience of the Long Distance Dedication has and will continue to shift as time goes on and the culture changes. Further, radio’s role in creating and maintaining the live archive of empathetic listeners is still a vital one. Storytelling formats on popular National Public Radio shows such as *This American Life* rely on the same themes of personal revelation and public expression of emotion that made (make) the Long Distance Dedication such lively, intimate texts.

Further, listening practices such as downloading and listening to talk radio podcasts on portable mp3 players indicate that there is still very much a cultural desire for media intimacy. We want stories. We want to listen to them through our car stereos, our computer speakers, and our earbuds. We want them to be embedded into our lives, to comprise the soundtracks of our lives, and to share them via social media. In the final chapter of this project, I will revisit the notions of tangibility and performance in the context of digital media.

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2 The LDD segment endured after Kasem’s departure from *American Top 40*, with dedications read by Kasem’s replacement Shadoe Stevens. It also endured on Kasem’s competing show *Casey’s Top 40*. For a complete history of the Long Distance Dedication, see Durkee, 89-104.


6 Douglas, 41.


12 Ibid., 114.

13 Ibid., 77.


15 Sandy Stone, “Split Subjects, Not Atoms; or, How I Fell In Love with My Prosthesis,” in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Habels Gray et al (New York: Routledge, 1995), 394. As an interesting side note, Stone experienced the wonders of a crystal-radio childhood as a boy—typical of the culture of radio hobbyism. However, she wrote this recollection of radio listening as a transsexual woman—a not insignificant fact given the that the focus of this chapter is on embodiment.

16 Douglas, 5.

17 Durkee, 1-5.

18 Ibid., 4.

19 Ibid., 89.


21 The LP was the format on which the syndicated shows were originally sent to radio stations nationwide. Local disc jockeys alternated between the syndication discs and their own local station identification spots and jingles.

22 Douglas, 5.


24 Ibid., xvii.


31 Premiere Radio Networks, American Top 40: The ‘80s, n.d.


33 This LDD was actually broadcast on Casey’s Top 40 on January 21, 1989 and quoted in Durkee, 98 as one of Casey’s favorite dedication letters.

34 In fact, the Houston song I previously discussed (“The Greatest Love of All”), is rendered much more poignant when one takes into account the fact that songwriter Linda Creed wrote the lyrics while undergoing treatment for an aggressive form of breast cancer that eventually claimed her life. “Linda Creed Biography,” Songwriters Hall of Fame, http://songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/bio/C125 (accessed April 20, 2010).


36 Ibid.


38 Premiere Radio Networks, American Top 40: The ‘80s, July 26, 1980. As an interesting side note, Linda Creed was one of this song’s co-writers.


40 Douglas, 4.

41 Premiere Radio Networks, American Top 40: The ‘80s, July 26, 1980. In my imagination, it turns out that “Cary” was actually Rod Stewart and had to return to “Ohio” to maintain his secret identity.

42 Ibid.


44 Premiere Radio Networks, American Top 40: The ‘80s, n.d.


47 Ibid.


49 Ibid.


51 Ibid.


55 Ibid., 4.

CHAPTER VI: “FEELS GOOD WHEN YOU PALM IT”\(^1\):

DIGITAL CONSUMPTION AND THE INTERNET ARCHIVE

A passage from Paul Goldstein’s 1994 book Copyright’s Highway describes an imminent communications and entertainment revolution:

The future promises a dazzling new possibility for access to entertainment and information: the celestial jukebox. Whether it takes the form of a technology-packed satellite orbiting thousands of miles above the earth or remains entirely earthbound, linked by cable, fiber optics, and telephone wires, the celestial jukebox will give tens of millions of people access to a vast range of films, sound recordings, and printed material, awaiting only a subscriber’s electronic command for it to pop up on his television or computer screen.\(^2\)

This notion of the “celestial jukebox” was common in popular imagination as legislators and industry folk sought to revise existing intellectual property policy in the early-to-mid 1990s. The celestial jukebox metaphor seemed to promise unprecedented access to entertainment—a blinding array of entertainment choices that could be simply plucked from the heavens at will.

What is striking about the idea of the celestial jukebox is that it predicts a shift in how we will come to view our media artifacts. When you put a coin in a traditional jukebox, of course you are aware of the records or CDs inside that allow a song to play. However, your quarters do not pay for ownership of the media artifact; they pay for the usage of that artifact. You do not own a CD copy of “There Are Raisins in My Toast” on the Waffle House jukebox; you are simply paying for the experience of hearing it while you scarf hash browns at 3:00 A.M. after a night of drunken revelry (becoming a “celestial jukebox” indeed—a true gift from the gods and music to your gin-soaked ears). In the years since Copyright’s Highway first appeared, the
promise of the celestial jukebox has largely been fulfilled, especially when it comes to popular music. Technologies such as satellite radio, streaming audio, iTunes, YouTube, and file sharing (both legal and illegal) allow consumers to locate and listen to a dazzling array of music from around the world. Digital recording, storage, and transmission of media (and their attendant “fidelity, facility, and ubiquity”) have been responsible for a revolution in the entertainment and information practices of the twenty-first century.³

Digital technologies have also been responsible for changing the way people consume and collect music. According to industry figures, the significant rise in (legal, paid-for) digital music downloads has not compensated for the dramatic slide in compact disc sales that has characterized the first decade of the twenty-first century.⁴ The industry’s mercenary worries over the state of the tangible media artifact have led to the addition of a wider variety of income streams into the standard artist contract: compact discs are now considered one among many items to be sold when promoting an artist’s live performances and available merchandise.⁵ However, hand wringing about the state of physical music artifacts and the impact of digital downloads on the practice of music collecting is not coming only from the industry. Music fans are holding impassioned debates on the subject of digital media and music collecting in popular media such as magazines and music-oriented Web sites. As I will argue, popular narratives involving tangibility, performance, and technology in the contemporary moment in music fandom are tales of coming to grips with new technologies and learning to absorb them into practices of contemporary music fandom. Because many see the tactile relationship between a fan and a music artifact as a deeply personal, intimate one, the loss of the tangible media artifact has caused many to mourn the loss of the human element in popular music fandom and collection. To some, older technologies seem authentic, while newer technologies seem artificial.
Throughout the project, I have made a case for examining music archives and their artifacts through the lens of tangibility, performance, and technology. Tangibility, I have argued, has always been a crucial component of popular music consumption because it represents the moment when the archive meets the repertoire—or, in other words, when performances embedded in media artifacts interact with the performances of using these artifacts. Performance, I have argued, is a broad and flexible way to think about the ways that the practices of creating a music artifact will ultimately interact with the ways that the artifact is used—and the ways the artifact itself performs (the wearing down of a record, the dog-earing and underlining of a book, the casting aside and filing away of a promotional file). Finally, technology, loosely defined as a mediating practice or artifact of music-making, allows us to consider a much broader range of materials than does the typical conceptualization of technology. Technology is not only the new gadgets that entice music fans; rather, everything from a song form to a drum to a genre-specific pose to a Long Distance Dedication is a technology. Further, technologies of representation (tangible performances, such as Chapter Two’s press kits, Chapter Three’s zines, and Chapter Four’s artist bios) function specifically as performances of industry, artist, and fan/community identity.

In our contemporary cultural moment of digital recording, transmission, and storage, we are witnessing a shift in what constitutes the archive. We are witnessing a shift in how people interact with popular music artifacts. We are witnessing a shift in how people perform their musical identities. In this chapter, I will revisit each of the three theoretical considerations that I have used to frame the popular music archive through contemporary narratives in popular culture. I argue that some of these narratives reveal cultural worries about loss of humanity in the era of technology that seems to defy embodiment (even though digital files are firmly embodied
in some storage medium). Ultimately, however, we are in the process of reconciling these concerns through the ways we are incorporating digital music technologies into our lives. I have selected three contemporary narratives in popular culture that I feel best embody these concerns. My argument will center on the iPod as it relates to tangibility, the play count as it relates to performance, and Auto-Tune as it relates to technology.

**Tangibility: the iPod**

“'It's hard not to get carried away with the iPod,’” declares a 2001 *Rolling Stone* review of Apple’s now-ubiquitous mp3 player. “'It's small, sleek and easy to use; it holds a few billion songs on a hard drive no bigger than an Oreo crumb and comes preloaded with tracks from a Beatles reunion that Steve Jobs arranged back in the Seventies. OK, so we're exaggerating a little[.]’” The tongue-in-cheek hyperbole of this review illustrates how the cultural impact of the iPod had already been determined from the time of its introduction in late 2001. The device’s ability to store hundreds (or thousands, depending on the model) of songs—allowing users to have access to their entire music library anywhere the portable, personal device can travel—is merely one among many features that guaranteed the iPod’s popularity. In 2007, Apple announced with great fanfare that the iPod had sold 100,000,000 units worldwide since its introduction. Exact sales figures may be difficult to gauge, but Apple indeed has sold a significant number of units by all known estimates. Despite the global recession and competition from other (and functionally, very similar) mp3 players, the iPod continues to sell steadily.

However, sales figures alone cannot adequately capture the peculiar way the iPod has captured the popular imagination. Scholar Michael Bull has described the iPod as “the first cultural icon of the twenty-first century.” Steven Levy goes a step further and claims not only that “it is the most familiar, and certainly the most desirable, new object of the twenty-first
century,” but also that “[y]ou could even make the case that it is the twenty-first century.”10 Why has this device so thoroughly enraptured music fans and cultural critics? The key to this device’s appeal may be related to Bull’s description of the iPod as “a sublime marriage between mobility, aesthetics and functionality, of sound and touch—enabling users to possess their auditory world in the palm of their hand.”11 This particular language—that the iPod allows an entire world in the palm of your hand—is common in early reviews of the iPod and in popular essays written about the device. I find the emphasis on the touching of the iPod extremely telling. In an era that seems to be characterized by the disappearance of tangible music artifacts (via the replacement of records and CDs with digital downloads), it is significant that many of the narratives about the iPod in contemporary popular culture emphasize the device’s tactile qualities. In the age of the electronic archive, the tangibility of music consumption (once located in listeners’ relationships with records and compact discs) has been displaced onto the iPod. Narratives of tangibility in iPod ownership reflect the continuing importance of embodiment in the contemporary era: the tactile relationship between listener and iPod reflects a cultural desire for closeness with others.

First, however, it would be prudent to discuss the iPod as it relates to the disappearance of tangible media artifacts in popular discourse. One common assumption in the era of the digital music download is that digital media transmission has made popular music less tangible. Particularly in the first few years of the twenty-first century, digital music files were often scorned by serious collectors of popular music. People found them tedious to organize and browse. They seemed less personal and less “real” than did compact discs. To many, digital music downloads were not desirable as gifts because they could not be purchased or displayed in the same ways that other music artifacts could be. As such, there were a number of subtle activities involved in record collecting that digital music files simply would not allow.12
Take, for example, a recent essay by Andrew Wells Garnar. In his observation of the ways that the iPod has changed his own music consumption, he begins by stating he has been a collector most of his life. Garnar claims to like the compact disc for its ease of display, and he writes that he finds satisfaction in collecting music as a material practice—physically sorting, displaying, and representing musical memories. “It’s with the rise of iMedia that the collector in me balks,” he writes. While the iTunes store allows for the downloading of album art and liner notes, “it’s not the same as owning the artifact itself. With the downloaded album, everything is mediated through the iPod or the computer. With the artifact, I can take it with me, touch it, hold it, shelve it in whatever way, read the liner notes anywhere without worrying about the interface.”

Garnar’s criticisms of the iPod and digital music collection are typical of collectors who worry that digital music delivery will take away the fun part of collecting—the touching, the holding, the physical imperfections. To Garnar, the implications of digital media are quite grave: the phenomena of digital music transmission and collection, to him, reveal “a particular desire to move beyond the material world, at least among those who can afford to do so. The hyperbolic formulation is: ‘the body is no longer really necessary!’ The general drift of this iPhenomenon moves toward the gradual erasure of materiality” and a denial of the importance of the body.

I would argue, however, that digital media have encouraged the displacement of tangibility and materiality, not their disappearance. Reading user accounts of iPod use, one is struck by how many people describe the tangible characteristics of the iPod as the device’s most appealing qualities. These narratives—along with narratives of “liveness” and intention of the iPod itself—indicate that embodiment has not at all been threatened by the digital delivery of music. In his 2007 book on iPod culture, Michael Bull quotes extensively from ethnographic
surveys of mp3 player users. Throughout the text, several participants rave about the physical satisfaction of interacting with their mp3 players. A 2004 survey filled out by a New Yorker reads, “‘It feels good, to hold it in your hand, to rub your thumb over the navigation wheel and to touch the smooth white surface … I have never cherished anything I bought as much as this little device.’”¹⁵ A female user in Virginia echoes, “‘I found that my most immediate attraction to it was the feel of it in my hand. I wanted to have it with me at all times.’”¹⁶

It is no coincidence that some of the joys of iPod ownership described in these accounts are almost sensual. Steven Levy writes that, upon first glance, the iPod does not appear to be a musical device. If someone who did not know what it was to see one and guess its purpose, she or he might mistake the iPod for a “very sexy detached thermostat that feels good when you palm it.”¹⁷ As a popular media tech writer, Levy was given an iPod to use and review. As he interacted with the iPod, it became clear to him that there was a personal relationship between a music listener and her or his iPod that was unlike the relationship between users and other gadgets: “It felt very good to hold. Spinning my thumb on the scroll wheel was satisfying. The smooth silvery black felt so sensual that it was almost a crime against nature.”¹⁸

The sensuality described in certain iPod narratives makes sense when one considers that the iPod functions as more than a music delivery device: it mediates a music fan’s experience of all her or his music. The iPod becomes an avatar for the artists represented in their music collections … even for the people in the listener’s life of whom the songs on the iPod evoke memories. The iPod can serve as a touchstone for the listener’s ideal identity, too; the songs stored on the iPod can represent the person you want to be. No wonder, then, that the iPod is often described in popular narratives as nearly human. For example, the “shuffle” feature on the iPod—which allows for songs in the iPod’s library to be played in a random sequence—is often
described as nearly human, having preferences in the order of songs played or which artists are played most frequently. Levy relates a humorous account of his own iPod’s shuffle preference: he swears that the iPod prefers Steely Dan to other artists and will over-represent the studio-dependent ’70s rockers each time the iPod shuffles. Anecdotal accounts from blog commenters, friends, and acquaintances seem to confirm the observation that each person’s iPod has a mind of its own when it comes to the “random” shuffle. Truly, the random shuffle seems not to be random at all! I myself have often felt mentally connected to my iPod and its shuffling whims. Sometimes, I swear that I correctly predict the next random track to play by hearing the opening notes of the next song in my head just before I press the button to cue the next random track. When I leave the house with the iPod attached to my ear, I am delighted on the days when it seems like the shuffle is reading my mind. How did you know I wanted to hear that song, iPod?

The bad news for all of us so obsessed is that, truly, the idea of the non-random shuffle is all in our heads. It is a bit of wishful thinking on the part of iPod listeners everywhere. In fact, the intriguing matter of the perception of the non-random shuffle has been of interest even to the realm of hard science. A 2009 article in *American Statistician* confirms that the iPod’s “shuffle” function does indeed create random play patterns. Our insistence that the iPod has its own agenda and its own whims is due to our close relationship with the device. We long to see the humanity in our media artifacts. The iPod, as it continues to replace compact discs and records, will continue to be a source of rich and fulfilling embodied practices for us. The longer we live with our iPods, the more alive they seem to be.

In an essay entitled “Alive and Clicking,” Peter Schaefer agrees with this sentiment. His iPod, he admits, is composed of plastic and circuits, “[y]et when I touch the click wheel, it comes to life. I can feel the iPod mobile digital device buzz with excitement as I scroll through my
options. It whirs and clicks, demanding my attention … I know that the device is only as alive as
I make it out to be, yet I can’t seem to shake the feeling that my iPod is somehow special.”21 The
feeling that the iPod is special, that it is more than just a music player, can be linked to its
function as personal identity touchstone. As I discussed in Chapter Five with the Long Distance
Dedication and radio narratives, electronic media have a history of functioning as a body
prosthesis in popular imagination. The iPod, too, can function as a prosthesis. For example, the
device’s storage capability is likened to a user’s embodied memories in a 2005 Newsweek essay
titled “I Can’t Live without my Darling iPod.” The author, a self-proclaimed middle-aged soccer
mom, discusses her delight at the iPod’s ability to contain the sum of her musical memories. She
writes that the youthful image associated with the iPod makes some people do a double take at
the sight of her “clutching mine and looking serene while jogging or sitting in the bleachers at a
sporting event. But who else except a boomer could possibly fill up an iPod that has 20 or 40
gigabytes? Save the MP3s and iPod minis for the youngsters. We’ll take the heavy-duty hardware
and maximum memory.”22

An extension of one’s embodied memories, a part of one’s identity, a partner and
companion to be touched and clutched and cherished: these are the narratives of tangibility that
accompany the iPod in our contemporary cultural moment. Just as the LP performs in its material
form—with the pops, hisses, and soft crackles that sound, no two records exactly the same in
their wear—so, too does the iPod perform in its material form. The iPod’s performance is a
humanized one. It has intentions; it has memories. Its performance as a holder of intangible
digital files is a distinctly embodied performance.

My final point concerning the iPod is that these particular narratives of tangibility
manifest only in popular accounts of portable, digital music players. Portable stereos have been
around in one form or another since (one might argue) the mid-century days of the transistor radio. The portable stereo as a truly personal device (with headphone jacks for one person and no external speaker) dates back to the 1979 launch of the Sony Walkman. The romanticized account of the Walkman’s creation holds that Sony’s Akio Morita was inspired to create the personal stereo while walking in the urban landscape of New York. Era narratives of Walkman use certainly did emphasize the personal nature of the Walkman, but I maintain that cultural concerns about the Walkman and the personal relationships between the Walkman and its users were not concerned with tangibility in the same way as in the case of the iPod.

Walkman users often found themselves on the receiving end of negative attention in popular discourses because many believed that the device allowed insularity and created an unsettling disturbance of public versus private space. A typical era critique lambasted Walkman users for tuning out external noises and bringing their musical lives into public. A 1981 article in *Money* begins “When you were in New York last month you wondered why some glassy-eyed folks were walking around with headphones wired to little boxes hanging around their necks … Those little boxes are portable tape cassette players. It seems that you don’t have to stay home to listen to your stereo these days.” Walkman users themselves admired the device for the ways it served as a buffer between them and the harsh noises of the world around them. They were allowed to use their imaginations, to create a personal soundtrack to the world around them, to aestheticize the landscape with whatever music selection they chose.

In spite of the personal nature of the Walkman as described in these accounts, the narratives of tangibility described in iPod use simply are not present. The Walkman, as much as it was enjoyed by its users, as useful as it was to them in making the world around them reflect their musical reality, was still regarded primarily as a tool that allowed for the portability of
meaningful, tangible music artifacts. The device itself did not embody each and every musical artist in a listener’s repertoire. In the era of the iPod, the joys of touching and interacting with physical media artifacts have been displaced onto our mp3 players. If era concerns about the Walkman betrayed a cultural fear of atomization and isolation, our contemporary obsession with touching our iPods reveals a cultural desire to connect with others. The iPod, as an avatar for the music artists we admire and the subjects of our memories, becomes a legitimate object of our affections.

Performance in the Age of the Electronic Archive: Play Counts as the New Music Archive

As I have argued, thinking about the popular music archive through the broad lens of performance allows for a richer understanding of archived materials than does a traditional approach that fails to recognize the performative aspects of music collecting and consumption. The archived materials I have studied throughout the project perform in multiple ways, whether it is a performance of genre and artist identity (as in Chapter Two’s press kits) or of disciplined fandom (as in Chapter Four’s teen-oriented artist bios). Performance remains a vital concept when we move from the physical archive to the electronic archive. First, let me state that the electronic music archive allows for the expansion of performance in many ways (performance of artist identity as encapsulated by their Web sites, virtual performance of fan identity, performance of the collecting of fans in the age of MySpace and Facebook band pages). It is worth emphasizing that this expansion of new kinds of performances to document does not require or involve any kind of erasure of materiality. The electronic archive is housed in an imperfect physical medium, just as the traditional archive is. The storage media may be multiple and may seem secure (with musical data’s existing on multiple computer hard drives, for example, or backed-up data on CD or USB drive), but they are ultimately as fragile and
impermanent as the media of the traditional archive. This fragility means that the preservation of the electronic archive will be driven by many of the same impulses that drive traditional archiving practices. Capturing a moment in time as experienced by a music fan or producer or artist in order to document and preserve that moment will be the electronic archivist’s goal.

In the era of the electronic music archive, we must recognize that the way that people collect music is changing. While there will always be a place for the collection of physical music media, it is also becoming apparent through the popularity of digital music downloads that the idea of collection needs to be conceived of in more broad terms. I propose that we acknowledge the importance of *accumulation* in digital music collection. One way to acknowledge the importance of accumulation is through the documentation and study of the digital play count. Briefly, a play count is a feature in digital music library software (such as iTunes) that keeps track of the total number of times a particular song is played. Digital music libraries can be organized by play count—effectively creating a personal “top hits” list. The play count can reveal surprising preferences (“Wow, I never realized I listened to *Hail to the Thief* more than *Kid A!*”) or unexpected embarrassment (“Man, apparently I’m really into Wilson Phillips.”). Play counts create an electronic archive of music fandom. As I will argue, the slow sedimentation of play counts in a user’s music library constitutes a performance of her or his musical identity.

Before I proceed with the discussion of the digital play count, it would be prudent to explore the performative and identity-making components of music collection in general. One might characterize music collection in the age of the electronic archive as the work of the “domestic stage manager” described by Simon Frith. According to Frith, music collection is often a highly individualized practice that gives us control over where, when, and how we listen to music. Thus, he claims, music taste is tied intimately to personal identity. A music collection
consists of semiotic markers of identity; “in this respect music is more like clothes than any other
art form—not just in the sense of the significance of fashion, but also in the sense that the music
we ‘wear’ is as much shaped by our own desires, our own purposes, our own bodies, as by the
intentions or bodies or desires of the people who first made it.” Frith’s likening of a music
collection to clothing highlights the performative dimension of music collection. Each bit of
music that you own has a public function, which is to represent you and your values to the world.
Collection is performative in that you are wearing your identity when you are “wearing” your
music collection. Or, to put it another way, “a music collection is a physical manifestation of an
individual’s taste in music. Thus if music taste is part of identity, then so is a music collection.”

It is significant that the performance of fan identity through collection is, ultimately, a
public one. Dick Hebdige writes that music choice is tied to not only identity formation but also
to group membership. For example, practices such as the creation of mixtapes (or mix CDs, or
iTunes playlists) create and sustain a collective sense of identity for people with shared musical
interests. When we know others are watching, fan identity becomes a self-conscious
performance—even when we do not seek to establish a collective identity with a group of like-
minded fans. For example, in an ethnographic study of a local office network, the authors found
that when workers shared their iTunes libraries across a subnetwork of office users, they became
very conscious of how their music collections represented them to others in the office. Music
identity, then, must be understood as a public performance. For that reason, I will return to the
concept of the play count as a collection marker. I will discuss the performance of user identity
created through the Last.fm Web site in order to demonstrate the public value of a collection of
digital play counts. Sites such as Last.fm make the collection of play counts an integral part of an
individual’s online musical identity and create an electronic archive out of each user’s music collection.

Last.fm (http://www.last.fm) is a music-based social network created in 2003 by Richard Jones, Martin Stiksel, and Felix Miller, three friends living in London. The site was first envisioned as a streaming music site that would be especially helpful for independent artists who wanted to upload their songs and promote them to a wide network of like-minded musicians and fans. The music sharing and music streaming functions of Last.fm remain one of the site’s most prominent features, but the inventors soon realized that Last.fm’s real appeal could be found in its ability to track play counts.

![A screenshot from the author’s Last.fm profile, which accumulates play counts by artist and by individual song.](image-url)

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**Top Artists**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Last 7 days</th>
<th>Last 3 months</th>
<th>Last 6 months</th>
<th>Last 12 months</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Coheed and Cambria</td>
<td>3,867</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Protest the Hero</td>
<td>1,050</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Radiohead</td>
<td>1,642</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>My Chemical Romance</td>
<td>1,504</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>785</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Raconteur</td>
<td>504</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Andrew Bird</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>The Faint</td>
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<td>10</td>
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**Top Tracks**

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<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Track</th>
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<th>Last 3 months</th>
<th>Last 6 months</th>
<th>Last 12 months</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Coheed and Cambria – The Crowning</td>
<td>231</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Protest the Hero – The Divine Suicide Of K.</td>
<td>189</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Protest the Hero – Bloodmeat</td>
<td>188</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Coheed and Cambria – Once Upon Your Dead Body</td>
<td>186</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Coheed and Cambria – Crossing the Frame</td>
<td>185</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Coheed and Cambria – Blood Red Summer</td>
<td>184</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Coheed and Cambria – Three Evils (Embodied In Love and</td>
<td>118</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My Chemical Romance – Welcome to the Black Parade</td>
<td>118</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Manicure – An Aid</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Coheed and Cambria – The Found (at Blood and Rank)</td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Figure 13. A screenshot from the author’s Last.fm profile, which accumulates play counts by artist and by individual song.
Richard Jones invented a plug-in called “Audioscrobbler” that could collect data on the songs and artists a user was listening to and then display that data on a personalized profile. Whenever you listened to a song via iTunes or Windows Media Player, the song would be scrobbled. Whenever you synced your iPod with your iTunes library, your iPod’s play counts would be scrobbled. Audioscrobbler proved to be a satisfying technology for many users. Jones circulated the plug-in among “his friends, who installed it, they told their friends, and ‘before long I was seeing people sign up from all over the world who I didn’t know, and I couldn’t trace how they found out about it.” Last.fm had 15 million users scrobbling play counts by the time the site was bought by CBS in 2007 and an estimated 37 million users as of 2009.31

Last.fm’s appeal, I argue, is due to users’ ability to craft a profile page with their musical identity visually represented—and then to connect with other fans and obtain recommendations via compatibility ratings. When a user visits another user’s Last.fm profile while logged in, common artists are automatically tallied.

Fig. 14. A screenshot of Last.fm’s musical compatibility rating. According to Last.fm, the author and her husband are Super compatible.

Music compatibility ratings between users are calculated using a proprietary algorithm and then displayed as Very Low, Low, Medium, High, Very High, or Super. A Super compatibility rating between two users is often reason enough to spur one person to comment on another person’s
profile—sometimes writing nothing more than “SUPER!!!!!!” in another user’s “Shoutbox.” The Last.fm profile also displays a user’s weekly top artists, a link to stream a user’s music library, and a space where a user can pen a personal biography. Updated instantaneously each time a user plays a song or syncs his or her iPod with the iTunes application, the Last.fm profile is a real-time electronic archive—a virtual performance of fan identity.

Figure 15. A screenshot of the author’s Last.fm profile, which displays the artists most played during a given week. Note also the elements of personalization on the right—an area where users can pen a personal biography, and even a widget that allows for the syncing of the Last.fm site with social networking site Twitter.

Collection as demonstrated by the play counts tallied by Last.fm’s Audioscrobbler is a highly visible public practice that speaks to the power and satisfaction of documentation and archiving.

Collection in the age of the digital archive is a virtual tally of musical experiences. As users accumulate play counts on their Last.fm profiles, they accumulate cultural capital among fellow fans. Play counts line up into place like dots on a pointillist painting—perhaps insignificant individually, but together forming a portrait of contemporary listenership.
Technology: Auto-Tune

“Traditional singing chops aren’t so useful in Auto-Tune’s world,” writes Jace Clayton in *Frieze* in 2009. “It’s neither a fight with technology nor love of it; it’s more like glossy coexistence, a strange new dance of give-and-take.” Clayton’s sentiments—that human vocal talent is irrelevant in an era when all recorded pitches can be perfected with software and that this newfound ability forces us to confront our relationship with technology—echo those of many people in the culture at large who find the widespread mixing practice distasteful and alienating. In this section, I will return to the concept of technology in the age of the electronic archive by discussing the cultural backlash against Antares Auto-Tune. As I will argue, many fear that this digital technology removes the human element from vocal performances.

This fear of removal of the human element in music is quite similar to cultural fears of loss of materiality that I discussed in the section on tangibility. As I argued, contemporary music collectors who mourn the loss of physical media artifacts fear the potential loss of materiality that digital music downloads seem to represent. Materiality in the case of music collection represents humanity because it reflects the imperfections of embodiment. To many collectors and lovers of physical media, artifacts such as records and compact discs have character because they have flaws. With use and wear, no two copies of a mechanically reproduced musical work perform the same way. In the case of Auto-Tune, the loss of humanity comes through the loss of imperfections in archived performances. As I will discuss, many critiques of Auto-Tune claim that the software makes vocals sound mechanized or robotic. Ultimately, I argue that the use of Auto-Tune makes people uncomfortable because it calls attention to the mediating role of technology in popular music. The backlash against Auto-Tune suggests that we still do not recognize the ways that technology always mediates our experience of music.
Auto-Tune was invented in 1996 by Andy Hildebrand, whose experience interpreting seismic data for the oil industry led to an unlikely-seeming discovery: autocorrelation, the technique that allows for seismic data to predict the presence of oil reserves underground could also be harnessed to identify (and ultimately shift) sound frequencies. As a signal processor, Auto-Tune detects the frequency of a note in Hertz and then nudges the pitch in the “correct” direction according to the key dictated by the user. Alternatively, the software can detect chromatic semitones and adjust the pitch according to whatever semitone is closest. In short, the result of using Auto-Tune is that vocals can be always on pitch. Since the late 1990s, Auto-Tune has been used frequently (and subtly) to correct tiny flubs in a vocal track that would be costly to re-record.

However, when Auto-Tune is set to detect notes chromatically and change them rapidly, the result is a distinctive metallic and hiccupy sound. The first well known use of Auto-Tune for an exaggerated, aesthetic purpose was Cher’s 1998 hit “Believe.” The success of that song and its distinctive vocal sound led to the christening of the exaggerated use of Auto-Tune as the “Cher Effect.” (On a home audio enthusiast Web site, a contributor snarkily comments, “In essence, we named the effect like scientists naming a new disease after its first victim.”) In the first decade of the 2000s, the Auto-Tune aesthetic has been resurrected by artists like T-Pain, who “has sent a dozen slightly raunchy, mechanically cheery singles into the Top 10” using AutoTune. Kanye West also has used the technology extensively. In songs like 2008’s “Heartless,” West employs Auto-Tune to create an icy, mechanical voice intended to mirror the pain and isolation of the song’s protagonist.

Because of the exaggeratedly mechanical way Auto-Tune has been aestheticized, many people hear a lack of humanity when they hear the popular effect. However, for the most part,
Auto-Tune on a track is indicated not by the presence of a particular sound, but by the absence of mistakes or imperfections. Generally, it is assumed that any time you hear a vocal recording that lacks pitch mistakes or subtle variations in pitches (especially in pitches that are held for several seconds), Auto-Tune has been employed.\textsuperscript{36} Regardless of how it is employed in a particular song, cultural awareness of its widespread use has caused many to interpret the use of Auto-Tune as a denial of human ability in favor of technological prowess. In an essay titled “Oh, My Ears! Auto-Tune Is Ruining Music,” Tony Sclafani laments, “Once upon a time, pop singers were actual singers. Yes, I know. That’s hard to comprehend since the pop charts are now dominated by artists who use Auto-Tune, the software plug-in that corrects the pitch of those who can’t really cut it in the vocal department and turns their vocals into robo-voices.”\textsuperscript{37} To Sclafani, the overuse of Auto-Tune in popular music is indicative of a cultural obsession with perfection at the expense of authenticity. He likens the use of Auto-Tune to the excessive artificiality that dominates contemporary popular culture. “After all, today we have models and actors whose faces and bodies were never intended by nature, reality TV that’s not real, and sports ‘heroes’ whose strength comes from pills not practice,” he writes. “It’s totally understandable that the commercial pop world would embrace an unnatural aesthetic.”\textsuperscript{38}

Auto-Tune has also received its fair share of criticism from influential producers of popular music such as Rick Rubin and Jay-Z.\textsuperscript{39} The critiques range from serious (such as Rubin’s encouraging artists to embrace a natural vocal aesthetic on the recordings he produces) to more lighthearted: on the red carpet at the 2009 Grammy Awards, members of the indie rock band Death Cab for Cutie wore pale blue ribbons to protest the overuse of Auto-Tune. Claiming that the members of Death Cab were advocates of the “blue” note (also known as melismatic sliding between notes), frontman Ben Gibbard said, “We're here to raise awareness about Auto-Tuner
abuse … we've seen a lot of good musicians being affected by this newfound digital
manipulation of the human voice, and we feel enough is enough.’” He wryly continued, “‘Let's
raise awareness … let's really try to get music back to its roots of [having] actual people singing
and sounding like human beings.’”

Many artists (often in the realm of indie rock and alternative music) also decry the use of
Auto-Tune for its artificiality. For example, in a 2006 Pitchfork interview, former New
Pornographers singer and current solo artist Neko Case says that Auto-Tune (and pitch shifting
in general) mean that singers do not actually have to know how to sing. “That shit sounds like
shit!” she exclaims. “It’s like that taste in diet soda, I can taste it—and it makes me sick … [y]et
there they are, all over the radio, jizzing saccharine all over you … And if Celine Dion is
supposedly the great singer that she says she is why is there auto tune on every fucking word in
her songs? Can’t you just hit it, Celine?” Case then recounts the time she asked the in-house
engineer at the studio where she was recording how many artists who recorded there chose not to
use Auto-Tune. The engineer replied that she was only the second artist who opted to record
without Auto-Tune (the only other artist who sang without the software plug-in was Canadian
pop songstress Nelly Furtado.)

What this and other narratives about Auto-Tune reveal is that, in the age of the electronic
archive, our mediating technologies are hyper-visible. When members of the popular music
community (artists, producers, and fans alike) yearn for human artistry and human imperfection
over technological fixes, they are looking for the common vulnerability that allows for us to
make meaningful connections to our favorite artists and songs. To many, we are living in an age
where the virtual realm appears to be in danger of supplanting the glorious imperfections of the
physical realm—where the electronic music archive can erase the mistakes of the embodied
performer. However, it is worth noting that technology *always* mediates our experience of music. As I wrote in the introduction to this project, music technology can be broadly construed as any mediating tool that allows artistic expression to take place.

Auto-Tune is just the latest in a long line of “artificial” music technologies that mediate our musical experiences. Vocal modulation of sounds through devices has existed since the invention of the Vocoder in the late 1930s. Similar technology resulted in the Sonovox, which relied on “two little biscuit-shaped gadgets which are placed on either side of the throat” in order to “change the human voice into anything from an articulate train whistle to a whispering wind.”

Even a technology such as the Sonovox, which allowed fanciful, unnatural articulations of instruments to be processed through the human voice, cannot be said to be more or less “authentic” or “natural” than any other music technology. Electronic projection from microphone to preamp to amplifier to speaker, for example, could be said to create a false dynamic mix of instruments. Multitrack recording could be said to create a false layering of sounds as it allows artists to sing harmony over their own voices and allows guitarists to create densely layered musical pieces that are impossible to recreate outside the recording studio. None of these technologies are any more “artificial” than the others.

In spite of what seems to many to be a cultural impulse to erase materiality, there is no such thing as an unmediated musical experience. Acknowledging the many ways that technologies allow us to connect with one another via popular music is the key to enjoying the potential that these technologies have to offer in the age of the digital archive. Technology, rather than erasing intimacy, can enhance it. As Jace Clayton astutely observes, “Rather than novelty or some warped mimetic response to computers, Auto-Tune is a contemporary strategy
for intimacy with the digital. As such, it becomes quite humanizing. Auto-Tune operates as a duet between the electronics and the personal. A reconciliation with technology.45

Distrust of new technology in popular narratives generally reveals a fear in the culture that we are losing humanity. However, as I have demonstrated, on the contrary, humanity is always entwined with our technologies. Fears of loss of tangibility in music artifacts can be construed as a fear of loss of humanity, but as I have argued, tangibility is displaced, and neither materiality nor humanity is lost. Our relationships with our digital music players and the way we perform our identities online indicate that our identities are becoming increasingly tied with virtual technologies. This close relationship between humanity and technology is not something to be feared: as revealed by the radio narratives of embodiment I studied in Chapter Five, our interactions with these technologies reveal a longing to reach across the ether (or, in this case, the ethernet) and touch someone … to make connections, whether to a music artist or to fellow music fans.

**Project Conclusions: Tangibility and Embodiment**

*Thematic Similarities.* One thing that is absolutely clear at the end of this project is that tangibility is an ever-present matter to be acknowledged in popular music research. Frequently, tangibility is a major part of the appeal of a particular document. The artifacts we cling to as music fans—whether they be records, posters, or mp3 players—are chattel onto which we project our values and dreams. Sometimes (as in Chapter Three’s punk fanzines), their tangible existence is proof of our commitment to a certain genre of music. Sometimes (as in Chapter Four’s teen bios), their tangible existence becomes a complex site of interactions between the cultural discourses that construct us as subjects and our own embodied practices that give meaning to our music artifacts. Furthermore, the absence of tangibility—as evidenced in the
Long Distance Dedications of Chapter Five—serve only to demonstrate how much the ability to touch and hold is missed when one lacks it. Forging a connection between the songs we listen to and the people we long to be near, the Long Distance Dedication combines the archive of the sound recording with the repertoire of physical longing and separation.

Throughout the project, the single theme that surprised me with its consistent recurrence is that of embodiment. Although this theme manifests differently among each chapter, its repeated presence nonetheless suggests that it is a vital concept when it comes to studying archived materials. First, throughout the project, I have found myself becoming increasingly aware of how the embodiment of the artifact itself affects the way it performs. For example, the press kits from Chapter Two provided such a fruitful way of viewing genre because of their peculiar embodiment. As artifacts, they reflect the time and attention required by the music marketing machine to make an artist commercially successful—but the fact that these documents are all but disposable to their target audience contributes even more to their presentational style and the ways the artifacts try to grab the reader’s attention. Even down to the paper they are printed on (quite often boldly colored or unusually textured), their embodied performance was significant.

Embodiment was prominent among the other chapters as well. Both Chapter Three (the punk fanzine chapter) and Chapter Five (the Long Distance Dedication chapter) dealt with the ways that people long to connect bodies across distance. The issues faced by participants in punk scenes demonstrate that scenes connect geographically distant bodies. It is the archive that connects these bodies. Members of local punk scenes are brought together through the trials and tribulations of the scene expressed in zines. The translocal punk scene is globally united by a body of artifacts that document the doings of various scenes worldwide. Finally, the collection of
these zines into a sample of historical documents (as I have done in my analysis) works to unite these bodies across both time and place in order to see the continuities among scene members and their practices. Chapter Five dealt with the issue of embodiment more specifically. The Long Distance Dedication is a technology designed to bridge geographical distance between bodies. Sometimes, it even functions as a prosthesis, filling in for the ability to communicate with others when circumstances are emotional and difficult. The heartfelt stories of the Long Distance Dedication remind us that our stories and songs are deeply embedded into our lives—even into our embodied practices.

Finally, Chapter Four emphasized the importance of embodiment through an analysis of the policing of bodies in teen-oriented artist biographies. This chapter (along with my analysis of the limited repertoire of poses that encourage stereotypes about race and gender in Chapter Two’s press kits), I feel, has the greatest critical implications in its use of the concept of embodiment. As technologies of representation, the teen-oriented artist biography is one among many means through which teenage female identity is shaped (and teenage bodies are policed). In spite of the belief that the age of the digital archive will lead to the erasure of the human body and its attendant human imperfections, I maintain that embodiment is and will remain a vital theme in popular music scholarship—particularly when it is part of a theoretical approach that encourages studies of performances.

Because of the importance of embodiment and tangibility in popular music research, it is imperative to acknowledge the centrality of performance to the music archive. Of course, popular music is performance-driven in the “traditional” sense; artists perform on recordings and in concert. However, the number of performances (broadly construed) that go into the production, distribution, and consumption of popular music is staggering, and the savvy popular
music scholar would do well to acknowledge them. Further, performances are not limited to “live” venues. They are embedded into the music artifacts we consume. Some performances, such as the performances of rock identity in Chapter Two’s press kits, crystallize cultural expectations and myths into specific technologies of representation. Chapter Four also illustrates how performances—in this case, the policing of performances of teenage, female fan identity—can be limiting or constraining. However, the notion of performance always offers emancipatory potential. The DIY performances of members of the punk scene encapsulated in Chapter Three’s punk fanzines suggest that one can perform values outside of mainstream media representations—and can forge relationships with other like-minded people while doing so.

Limitations and Future Challenges in Popular Music Archive Research. When dealing with archival research, the most pertinent question one can ask about her sources is: What is left out of this archive? Documentation and cultural attempts at remembrance are always shot through with questions of power and representation. Some people may not have access to the documentation devices that allow for archival practice. Some people may value the many ways that culture can be transmitted through embodied practices over the archived artifact. I am aware that the archives that I have used throughout the project come with their own history and limitations. For example, any archive of “popular music” in general terms will likely underrepresent artists of color and non-American artists. There is no way of verifying this suspicion that I have without intensive data-gathering and statistical analysis that are beyond the scope of this or any project on popular music. I would like to acknowledge that as such, my analyses cannot tell the whole story. Further, my artifacts are not your artifacts, and my viewing of them is also colored by my own experiences and standpoint. However, I do not expect that one single reading of any artifact could ever tell the whole story. The beauty of archival scholarship is that
there are always surprises when you approach a collection. There are always things you did not expect, and no study can ever be replicated elsewhere because no two archives are the same. For that reason, I encourage popular music scholars to seek out archival collections near them and see what they find. Such studies enrich our understanding not only of the value of archives, but of the world in general.

It is also the case that this study has not touched on the political-economic dimensions of popular music or the music archive. Issues of power and capital are vital ones to investigate in the coming years—particularly as popular music shifts from being sold as products to being sold as services. Patrick Burkart suggests that scholars and citizens should also be concerned about “the ever-shrinking number of gatekeepers, owners, and managers of intellectual property, and their ever-growing market power and political power ... [b]ecause the new cultural landlords in cyberspace enjoy state-sanctioned monopolies, and the policing powers to enforce them, they act as agents of state capitalism and fuse legal authority with market power.”

Finally, I am aware that many claims that I have made about the particular era we are currently living in (the era of the electronic archive) assume a measure of privilege on the part of popular music fans. I do acknowledge that the “age of the digital music archive” is still not a reality for most of the world. Internet access worldwide has exploded since 2000 and currently encompasses approximately 1.8 billion users worldwide. This number, while significant, still represents only about 26% of the world’s population. Even in the United States, Internet access is not total. As of 2009, measures have been being taken by the Federal Communications Commission to provide broadband access to the 93 million people in the country who are not currently connected. According to the National Broadband Plan Consumer Survey, about 2/3 of Americans do have broadband access. Non-adopters have been divided into four categories of
likely adoption: Near Converts, who are viewed as likely to get broadband soon; Digital Hopefuls, who lack the resources for access; the Digitally Uncomfortable, who are skeptical that they would enjoy access; and the Digitally Distant, who simply do not see the point of being online.48

In spite of what the Digitally Distant say in the United States, worldwide Internet access will continue to be a major measure of the flows of globalization. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that Internet access will be considered a right, not a privilege, as the years go on. A recent BBC world service poll of 27,000 people from 26 different countries shows that nearly 80% of people surveyed believe that Internet access is a fundamental right.49 As such, it will be more important than ever in the coming years to assess the impact of the digital archive on popular music fandom.

On October 26, 2009, Yahoo closed and deleted the entire cache of its once-popular GeoCities personal Web domains. This service, started in 1994, became one of the most widely used online services in the late 20th century due to its free hosting and user-friendly interface. GeoCities sites were known primarily as often garish, highly personal spaces that reflected users’ family lives, hobbies, and media use. What is striking about the GeoCities purge was not simply that the service ceased to be offered; every trace of these personal Web sites was deleted by Yahoo. This move prompted the grassroots efforts of scores of electronic archivists to preserve as many of these sites digitally as possible. Speaking about the GeoCities purge, digital archivist Jason Scott remarked

Already, little gems have shown up in the roughly 8000+ sites I've archived. Guitar tab archives. MP3s that surely took the owners hours to rip and generate. GIF files, untouched for 13 years. Fan fiction. Photographs and websites of people long dead. All
stuff that, I think, down the line, will have meaning. It's not for me to judge. It's for me to collect.50

The GeoCities example, I feel, points to a valuable lesson about the digital archiving of fan practices: it is a precarious business. Future researchers will likely find that the digital preservation of virtual spaces will be a major institutional goal in the coming years. Policies for collecting and storage are being developed and revised by libraries and archives even as I write this. Budgets are always tight, time is always precious, and there is no shortage of artifacts (both traditional and digital) to preserve. What I have intended to convey throughout this project is that archives demand a research strategy that acknowledges not only the scarcity of documents, but also the scarcity of time we have to appreciate them. The vulnerability of the archive mirrors our own corporeal vulnerability. Its nature, like ours, is ultimately fleeting.


2 Paul Goldstein, Copyright’s Highway: from Gutenberg to the Celestial Jukebox (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 21-22.

3 Ibid., 163.


5 Ibid., 11.


10 Levy, 1.
11 Bull, Sound Moves, 1.


14 Ibid., 35.

15 Bull, Sound Moves, 3.

16 Female user in Virginia quoted in Bull, Sound Moves, 158.

17 Levy, 1.

18 Ibid., 18.

19 Ibid., 227-233.


25 All of these uses and concerns are found throughout Bull’s ethnography of personal stereo users in the era of the Walkman. See Michael Bull, Sounding out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life (Oxford, England: Berg, 2000).


27 Brown and Sellen, 46.


31 Ibid.


35 Quote from Tyrangiel. There’s even the I Am T-Pain iPhone app that went on sale in late 2009. For the price of a $3 download, iPhone users can get endless amusement out of Auto-Tuning their own voices either freestyle or to backing tracks or beats. See Matthew Moore, “Auto-Tune iPhone App I Am T-Pain on Sale,” Telegraph.co.uk, September 4, 2009, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/apple/6139386/Auto-Tune-iPhone-app-I-Am-T-Pain-on-sale.html (accessed May 5, 2010).

36 The use of Auto-Tune for purely corrective purposes is assumed to be nearly universally employed, according to Rick Rubin. Rubin says, “Right now, if you listen to pop, everything is in perfect pitch, perfect time and perfect tune… that’s how ubiquitous Auto-Tune is.” Quoted in Tyrangiel.


38 Ibid.

39 Jay-Z’s first single from 2009’s *The Blueprint 3* was called “D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune)” and served as a protest against what he sees Auto-Tune representing in rap music: excessive commercialization and fluff. I am leaving this example to the footnotes because his critique of Auto-Tune is not one of fear of technology or lack of humanity. See Ed, “Jay-Z Announces the Death of Auto-Tune,” The Pedagogy of Hip Hop, http://thepedagogyofhiphop.com/?p=419 (accessed May 5, 2010).


41 As I have studied narratives of artificiality and lack of humanity concerning Auto-Tune, it has occurred to me that perhaps there are racialized components to the backlash over Auto-Tune. For example, exaggerated Auto-Tune has been employed a lot in rap music (by African-American artists such as T-Pain and Kanye West) but has frequently been the target of criticism in the indie or alternative rock community (which is overwhelmingly a white genre). The racial dimension of the discourse over Auto-Tune use would be a very fruitful line of inquiry for future research.


43 Ibid.


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