

U2 AND THE MYTH OF AUTHENTICITY IN ROCK

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Definitions of stylistic categories as inclusive as 'rock' are problematic. In a previous work (Moore 1993) I adopted what might be called an immanent definition, in terms of consistencies of stylistic practices viewed across a span of forty years. Such a definition is adequate for straight musicology, but becomes problematic when discussing rock in a larger cultural context. It appears to me that this larger context necessitates consideration of the issue that is 'authenticity'. This is not to make any gross equation between, for instance, 'rock' and 'authenticity' on the one hand, and 'pop' and 'commerciality' on the other, but is to recognise that rock music is, in part, defined by its constant engagement with the issue. It is this that forms the underlying motivation for this essay. My approach will endeavour to respond to Simon Frith's suggestion that "The most misleading term in cultural theory is ... 'authenticity'. What we should be examining is not how true a piece of music is to something else, but how it sets up the idea of 'truth' in the first place..." (Frith 1987:137).

Following a contextualising preamble, I shall focus on the music of the Irish rock band U2, analysing in particular the song 'With or without you' to discover the ways in which it might be perceived as setting up an idea of the 'authentic'. In this, I believe that the test of my approach should lie in its plausibility rather than its predictability, because the actions of the individual

